University of Cincinnati

Date: 10/17/2013

I, LaShanta Y. Jones Tinner Ph.D., hereby submit this original work as part of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Educational Studies.

It is entitled: 
The Spiritual Journey: Black Female Adult Learners in Higher Education

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The Spiritual Journey:
Black Female Adult Learners in Higher Education

A dissertation submitted to the
Graduate School
of the University of Cincinnati
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in the Department Educational Studies
of the College of Education, Criminal Justice, and Human Services

by

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Abstract

This study explored the experience of Black female adult learners and how spirituality influenced their academic journeys. Research concerning Black female adult learners in higher education is ostensibly partial. These data offered an extended understanding of Black female adult learners’ academic experiences, while also investigating common reasons for attending school and expounding upon the connection between spirituality and academic survival.

Womanist theory and the outsider within concept framed this work. This qualitative study used narrative inquiry and autoethnographic design. Semi-structured interviews were used to collect the stories of Black female adult learners’ academic experiences from a spiritual perspective in an effort to unveil how they maneuvered through the educational system. The results were five oral presentations of Black female adult learners including the author written as testimonial narratives. The findings may prove beneficial to the Student Affairs profession as well as the fields of Psychology, Social Foundations in Education, African-American Studies, Women Studies, and Theology.
Dedication

To the women of this study, I dedicate this project to you. Your strength, wisdom, and testimonies were profound. I am so honored to have had the opportunity to share your story.

To my children, Saleema and Amir, I also dedicate this work to both of you. Remember, there is nothing in this world that God has for you that another can take from you. Always move forward and God will continue to increase your territory. Just keep the faith.
Acknowledgements

I thank God Almighty. God unveiled it all! If it were not for Him this research could not have been completed. He gave me the vision. I just did the work. Praise Him!

Gerald R. Tinner – my spouse, my partner, and my best friend. You have given me so very much and have never let me down. You supported me to the very end. You are a wonderful man of God and you have my heart forever. I love you this much.

Saleema & Amir Tinner – thank you for being there with the greatest hugs and brightest smiles that often reminded me of why your mom could survive the journey. I love you.

Benjamin & Geraldine Jones and James & Mary Reid – your spirits run through my veins. Here on earth and in the heavens, you four have been my guardian angels and the most influential grandparents. I carry you wherever I go.

Reynaud & Josie Jones - I thank you for your unconditional love, support, wisdom, and guidance. I am most grateful that you prayed for me and made Christ first and foremost in our home. God has truly watched over me because you asked Him to do so. I could not have done this without you. Even when I wanted to give up, you made it okay. I love you and I am so blessed to have you as my parents.

Mrs. Mattie Tinner- you was there every step of the way and I do not even think you realized it. Thank you for helping me with my children. Thank you for loving me as your daughter-n-law, feeding us, helping around the house…you name it, you did it. More importantly, thank you for your wisdom. I love you. I am so very glad you are in my life.

Reynaud II, Bridgette, & the Jones Busters – you are the best brother ever! I simply love you. Your prayers made all the difference. Know HE is not done with us yet. Bridgette thank you for always providing words of encouragement. Tay, Addie and RJ— auntie loves you. THINK BIG.

Curtis, LaKrisha, & the Boys- thanks for giving me a home away from home. Kyran and Kedan – I am smarter than a 5th grader. 😊 However, you two are definitely SHINING STARS! Keep learning little Einstein’s.

Patricia Littlejohn - you are a gem. I am grateful for our sister bond. Trevon and Brandon - live out your dreams.

The extended Jones and Reid Family - look at what we did! I am so very proud to carry the family names. Meshyal Supreme, this is especially for you!

The extended Tinner Family- you welcomed me with open arms into your family almost twenty years ago and have loved me ever since, as I do you. You have no idea how much that means to me.
Dr. Vanessa Allen-Brown – whatever God put in your spirit; I hope he passes it through
generations. You are such a wonderful person. I thank you from the bottom of my heart for
staying with me, continuing to support me and encouraging me to believe that I was capable of
accomplishing this goal. You always knew I had it within me to complete this work and you
never let go. You were my angel. Words cannot express how grateful I am for your kindness,
friendship and guidance.

Dr. Lanthan Camblin- you made my work make sense! You never left me, but challenged and
directed me through very rough patches. You helped bring clarity every step of the way. You are
fabulous teacher and friend. It is so important to have people like you as we go through this
process. I am so very fortunate to have had you on my team. I believe the end result is stronger
because of your guidance. I will always remember you for helping me through this journey and
never walking away.

Dr. Steven Sunderland - you walked on board and did not think twice. You gave me peace in one
of my most anxious moments and helped me analyze my research in a very different light. I am
forever grateful.

Dr. C. Bleuzette Marshall - you are a wonderful example of grace. In the most sophisticated way,
you helped me transform this work and make it my own. As a friend, teacher, and sister, you
have never let me down. I pray I can return the favor and that our friendship/sister bond will
never change. Love you bunches!

Dr. P. Eric, Claudia, & Erica Abercrumbie – Doc - I do not even know what to say to you. If it
were not for you and all the conversations, support, and prayer, I am not sure what the outcome
would have been. You are amazing. I have learned so much from you and respect you dearly.
Thank you for making sure that I fulfilled this dream. Long after my days of being your
apprentice, your instructions were whispers in my ear. With all my love, ASHE, it is Phinally
Done. Claudia – thank you for the love and support. Erica – you have become such a beautiful
young woman. Continue to be strong and confident in all that you set to accomplish.

Daniel Cummins – this is all yours Bro! You know this to be true. Your words of encouragement
were never forgotten. It has been long, but I don’t regret it. I love you and the family so much.

Dr. P O’Reilly, Dr. Judith Frankel, Dr. Mitch Livingston, Dr. Deborah Merchant, Dr. P. Eric
Abercrumbie, Dr. Annette Hemmings, Dr. Roger Collins, Dr. Dan Wheeler, and Dr. Elizabeth
Peavy (rest in peace) – your teachings and words of wisdom were never forgotten but
emphasized in the body of this document. You have forever left an impression in my life.

EPS & AACRC Family (current and former) – Dr. Stacy Downing, Mr. Eric “Wahtahead”
Watford, Ewaniki Moore-Hawkins, Dr. Brandi Hutchins Elliot, Dr. Terri Hurdle, Mr. Sachin
Soni, Dr. Derrick Jenkins, Ms. Leisan Smith, Ms. Connie Cocco, Ms. Gila Johnson, and may
they rest in peace, Mrs. Ella Mills and Ms. Jane Roe. This journey would not have been possible
without each of you by my side at one point or another. Congratulations to us all. God bless our lives as we continue to move forward. HARAMBEE!

Frank Bowen, Reginald Brown, & UC Student Life - you all are some of the best individuals I have ever met. Long after my years working with you, our friendship and love has never died. We were truly a family.

Darwin T. Turner Scholars Program – you were a gift to me. You touched my life more than I could have ever touched yours. Continue to move forward and always strive for excellence!

Dr. Chantae Recasner – sister-girl you are tough. You are a miracle worker. Your gift for writing and editing is unbelievable. God has touched you. Your spirit is true, your work is astonishing and your words and advice shed so much light and transformed the work.

To Jennifer Ramakers Hargrove & Family – I love you sista! It is nothing like having a BFF to call and text daily about life. Thank you for traveling this road with me all these years. You and the family are always in my heart.

Eddie “Phife”, Tameka, & the Jenkins Family - juice go flush! Thank you for family! A friendship like ours is forever.

Kristen Bea & Family – your strength and persistence to survive only means that greater things are upon you. I pray that God continue to keep and bless the family.

LaToya DuBose, Amara Wright, Tamara Young-King, & Jennifer Jones-Johnson - we have been friends for over thirty years. I am so grateful for such wonderful friendships. When I was stressed, I smiled and thought of all our years of laughter and memories. It made everything alright.

Dr. Laverne Gyant – You taught be how to think out the box and not be afraid to voice what I believed. You challenged me to take risks and be proud of my research. I hope this study makes you smile.

Ken, Phyllis, & the Aggrey Family – you stepped up and you showed out. Serving as my editor and family booster club gave me the confidence I needed to make it through. Kindness is never forgotten.

To E.B.C. – thank you for your prayers. It worked! Youth Ministry - It takes a village to raise a child. You were a blessing throughout this process.

Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Inc. - may we continue to service all mankind and be a guiding light sorors. For we know that we can accomplish anything. For generations we have led many and brought others up through the struggle. I am honored to be a member. I would like to specifically acknowledge, Mrs. Grace M. Daniels, Mrs. Iva Brown, Mrs. Tina Merriweather, Dr.
Dorienna Alfred, Dr. Natalie Cumberlander Zolicoffer, the women who traveled this road with me and Sigma Omega Chapter.

Alpha Tau Nu: Society for Black Women - there is nothing amateur about this accomplishment. May our legacy continue to be at the University of Cincinnati. May our bond as sisters always flourish. We truly are soldiers. Ms. Pamela Quarles – we made it! Again! I so loved the 5 a.m. calls.

National Sorority of Phi Delta Kappa, Sigma Chapter - may we continue to educate our youth, work together in sisterhood and walk a path that is righteous and of truth. Mrs. Sharon Alfred, thank you for being such a positive influence.

IRIS, ITRPS, and 2600 and 2800 EICs’ - even when you did not know it, you helped me succeed! Greg Beyerlein - thank you being so wonderful. Management Team - I appreciate your leadership. A special thanks to Mrs. Diane Jackson, Mrs. Marcia Huntington, Mrs. Shandelin Anderson, Ms. Frances A.Cole, and Mr. Michael Obinna. Your prayers were received.

My neighbors – Home is special because of each of you.

If I have forgotten anyone in my acknowledgments, please know I love and thank you.

I won’t give up nor give in.
I am holding on till the end.
I will be steadfast, unmoving
Always abiding in you
Lord, I am standing in Your Will.

(Malaco, 1999)
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CHAPTER I: PROLOGUE

I started my doctorate program when I was 23-years old. It was not my intent to go back
to school, but I found myself enrolled after taking a position at a university and being persuaded
to continue my education.

I remember the first day of school. I had worked a full day and there I was, sitting in a
7:00 p.m. statistics class for the next two hours. I was not ready. I had recently finished my
Master’s degree and had made a vow, “that’s it”! I had just completed both my undergraduate
and graduate programs within five years. At that point, I did not feel mentally prepared to be in
that position again.

But after much reflection, I decided to do it.

I was a child of the 1970s and 1980s. My parents and grandparents lived through the
early Civil Rights Movement and constantly stressed the value of why we as a people—Black
people—should be in the classroom, training room, or any room that allowed us to use our minds
to empower ourselves. I was always encouraged to attend school and receive a good education. It
was engrained that education was the gateway for a promising future for both me and my
community. I was warned that the journey would not be easy, that it would come with trials and
tribulations, but it would be most rewarding. The message was to stay focused and never give in
to the obstacles that would inevitably welcome me at my doorstep.

As I remembered what had been embedded in my mind—“go to school, do your best,
push forward”—I had to let old wounds heal and move on. I had made it to the final frontier. I
was entering a doctorate program. I was moving towards the pinnacle of my educational career.
Yet, the journey was not without struggle. I lived through some of the most distressing moments in my life, and after getting sick with a very severe illness right before my 25th birthday, I just threw up my hands and thought I had let it go.

But again and again, I kept coming back. I kept hearing that voice in my head saying, “Keep pushing forward.” Each year I would do something toward my degree that brought me one step closer to the finish line. Each time, I would face challenges that prevented me from completing what I started. Now, at 38, I am even more determined to finish. I am an adult learner now. My life and my purpose have transformed. I am not that young, traditional student anymore. I have a husband, children, and a life encompassing multiple responsibilities.

Along the way, I met other Black women who, like me, went through something—well many things—that brought about challenges to their academic journey. As I conversed with them, I found that I was not alone in how I felt or what I had experienced. Most have had to wait until later in life to pursue and complete their undergraduate or graduate program. Over the years, I have listened to many stories about the academic experience that has led so many Black women to and through higher education. I have come to realize that with us all, the academic journey has come with a price. Regardless, we move on, we succeed one way or another. But I wondered, “What really has kept us or keeps us going”? While having coffee one day with a close friend, also a Black female adult student, I asked her that very question. She simply responded, “My spirituality”!

**Background**

Ten years after the groundbreaking decision of *Brown v Board of Education*, the Civil Rights Act of 1964 was established to correct the wrongs that had been done historically to Blacks in education (Allen, 1992). One specific goal of the act was to increase the population of
Black students in predominately white institutions (PWIs) and other colleges and universities. Allen (1992) reported that the time for change was most appropriate for two major reasons: “a) granting access to higher education was seen as one major solution to the problem of racial equality, and b) public support for higher education was strong due to colleges and universities experiencing ongoing expansion” (p. 26).

Many Black women took advantage of this opportunity and have filled university halls ever since. The U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) reported that currently, Black women rank as one of the largest constituencies in higher education (2012). Black women view education as a strategy to restructure and improve unconstructive realities. Both the traditional Black female and the adult learner believe in the promise of education (Sealey-Ruiz, 2007b). Black women are “secure in trusting that a degree will lead to opportunity and reverence” (Sealey-Ruiz, 2007b, p. 141), although they still face the “permanence of racism” (Bell, 1992), “gender inequality” (Collins, 2000), classism (Collins, 2000) and other forms of oppression—factors that have historically decreased the odds of academic success (Sealey-Ruiz, 2007b, p. 141).

Higher education is reported as a microscopic world of the larger society for most Black women (Zamani, 2003). Scholars have stated that the undercurrents of systematic oppression leave Black women feeling invisible within the academy (Coker, 2001; Collins, 2000; Cozart, 2010; Johnson-Bailey, 1998). “We are all too often not treated as central subjects of analysis, but as revolving objects—never mentioned, heard but not listened to, or at best, occasionally examined to illustrate a negative point,” argued Coker (2001, p. 7). Yet, Black women “bring a set of experiences, expectations, and psychological dynamics to higher education settings” (Thomas, 2001, p. 140), and provide a cultural perspective that alters their experiences (Collins,
2000; Johnson-Bailey, 1998). These aspects are significant to the achievement of Black female adult learners, differing from that of either their White female counterparts or male (Black and White) adult learners. It affects how they maintain during the academic journey (Thomas, 2001).

**Statement of the Problem**

*Did you want to see me broken?*

*Bowed head and lowered eyes?*

*Shoulders falling down like teardrops.*

*Weakened by my soulful cries...*

*...You may shoot me with your words,*

*You may cut me with your eyes,*

*You may kill me with your hatefulness,*

*But still, like air, I'll rise.*

*(Angelou, 1978)*

Black women who exist at the oppressive intersection of race, class, and gender (Collins, 2000) and also wrestle with family, finances, psychological wellbeing and health (Coker, 2003; Watt, 2003) believe that the spiritual experience contributes heavily to finding “peace within the midst of the storm” (Abercumbie, 2004, p. 56).

In her poem, “Still I Rise,” Maya Angelou (1978) eloquently described how, despite trials, tribulation, challenges, and oppression, Black women eagerly try to overcome obstacles. Rising above elements of life that bring about struggle and inequality for Black women and their community has been made possible by several factors, but spirituality has been noted as one of the “most dependent elements contributing to the strength and endurance of Black women” (Patton & McClure, 2009, p. 42). Thus, spirituality becomes a mechanism for overcoming
struggles while confronting the academic journey. Spirituality is a method of survival throughout their schooling. It aids in handling both success and failure, but more importantly helps to maintain physical and mental health (Coker, 2003; Hill, 2009; Tisdell, 2007; Watt, 2003; Witherspoon, 2008). Embracing a spiritual perspective makes Black women feel more complete and whole in the academy (Cozart, 2010). Despite the multiple levels of marginalization experienced, Watt (2003) claimed it is through their spiritual connection that they are able to cope.

Like Watt (2003), many researchers have examined the important role spirituality has played in ensuring survival and constructing identity within Black culture (Newlin, Knafl, & Melkus, 2002), yet, little has been presented about how Blacks, particularly Black women, define spirituality. In addition, research regarding spirituality and academia has been dedicated mostly to Black administrators or traditional-aged students (Cozart, 2010; Patton and McClure, 2009; Watt, 2003). Thus, the paucity in the documented experiences of Black female adult learners and their spirituality is alarming. As a leading student population across colleges and universities (NCES, 2012), this poses a concern for three reasons: 1) there are limited current indications of why the number of Black female adult learners explicitly continues to climb; 2) current information of the academic experience for Black female adult learners has been partial within the past thirty years and typically coupled with white female adult learners and the adult learner population in general; and 3) although spirituality has been identified as an important factor for academic enhancement for some constituents of the Black female population in higher education, the spiritual outlook and development of Black female adult learners has been considerably understudied.
Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this research study was to explore the experience of Black female adult learners and how spirituality influences their academic journey. These data presented a better understanding of the Black female adult learner’s experience, narrated in her own voice, while also capturing common reasons for attending school and explicating the linkages between spirituality and academic survival.

Research Questions

This project seeks to explore the following:

1. What are the present motives leading Black female adult learners to higher education?
2. What are the recent challenges for Black female adult learners in higher education?
3. How do Black female adult learners define spirituality?
4. How has spirituality influenced the academic journey of Black female adult learners?

The intent of these questions was to provide further insight to institutions of higher education on how to better serve the needs of the Black adult learner population. Furthermore, the spiritual narratives could possibly be seen as food for thought and inspiration for students who experience similar circumstances.

Overview of Conceptual Frameworks

The theoretical frameworks for this study draw primarily upon Walker’s womanist theory and also utilize Collin’s Black women’s standpoint theory as the outsider within. Womanist theory considers how spirituality is embedded into one’s daily journey from holistic and spiritual perspectives (Walker, 1983). “A womanist framework analyzes the influence of race, class, and gender of the lives and health of African American women,” (Taylor, Mackin, & Oldenburg,
2008). Each experience is interdependent upon the other, allowing for transformational learning and growth (Collins, 2000; Dirkx, 1997).

Black women’s standpoint theory can assess the experience as the outsider within (Collins, 1986, 1991, 2000), authenticating the journey. Collins wrote that the daily experiences of Black women are the foundation to understanding their circumstances (Collins, 2000; Sealy-Ruiz, 2007b). To grasp the true story of Black women in academia, Collins used this perspective to produce “a distinctive analysis of race, class, and gender” (Collins, 1986). Black women are the center of analysis using this theoretical stance, and therefore, are able to reveal aspects of reality only known to them (Collins, 1986).

Significance of the Study

The significance of this research was two-fold. First, literature focusing on Black female adult learners has been scarce. While there are noteworthy studies (Coker, 2001; Denson, 2009; Henry, 1985; Johnson-Bailey, 1994; Sealey-Ruiz, 2007b; and Thomas, 2001) the span of time has ranged over a thirty-year period. In order to stay abreast of the topic, this dissertation continued examining the experiences and challenges of Black female adult learners in order to keep the literature on Black female adult learners current and rich.

Secondly, research indicates that Black females are challenged with levels of marginalization during their academic careers but through their spiritual connection are more able to cope (Watt, 2003). Many theorists acknowledge spirituality is finding a relevant place in higher education (Bowman & Small, 2012; Dirkx, 1997; Tisdell, 2007). Considering how spirituality affects the academic journey of Black adult females can also influence the decision making of college and university leaders who must ponder the “religious and spiritual lives” of
students in order to determine if the academic experience promotes or hinders healthy spiritual
growth, development and well-being (Bowman & Small, 2012, p. 34).

**Definition of Terms**

Several terms were used throughout this document that may not have been defined within the
context of the sentence. To establish a base for common understanding, the following are
operational definitions used throughout the document.

Achievement: refers to the act or process of finishing something successfully.

Adult Learner: refers to 1) an individual beyond the age of 24; 2) one who returns to
school after experiencing a break between any education experience; and
3) one who is financially independent from parental support (Coker, 2001,
Burns, 2011).

African American or Black:

refers to a person of African heritage or descent born in the United
States. These terms will be used interchangeably.

Blessed: refers to the word “barak” of the Old Testament which means to fill with
benefits as an end in itself or make the object a benefit to others (Brand,

Generation: refers to a representation of individuals born and living around the same
time.

He: refers to God.

Middle-Class: refers to individuals in intermediate or skilled positions with financial
income varying, exposed to suburban living and having a better quality of life overall. (Rollock, Vincent, Gillborn, & Ball, 2012).

Nondenominational: refers to being a part of a Christian-based church with no affiliation to a mainline denomination (Wenger, 2009).

Predominately White Institution:

refers to an institution of higher education comprised of mostly white students.

Traditional Student: refers to 1) an individual under the age of 24; 2) one who enters college directly after high school; and 3) one who is typically financially dependent on a parent/guardian.

Religion: refers to a structured way of expression through rituals, myths, symbols, teachings, and music (Fowler, 2000).

Religio-Spirituality: refers to relationship between “spirituality and religion without the problems associated with using spirituality and religion synonymously or separately” (Witherspoon, 2008, p. 12).

Spirituality: refers to believing in something or someone greater than oneself (Hill, 2009), therefore focusing on the conscience to empower and influence (Dillard, 2006; Patton & McClure, 2009).
CHAPTER II: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

For the purpose of this study, adult learners referred to any “individual beyond the age of 24; one who returns to school after experiencing a break between any education experience; and one who is attempting to be financially independent from parental support” (Coker, 2001, p. 6).

In recent decades, the adult learner population has increased at colleges and universities (Taniguchi & Kaufman, 2005). The NCES 2012 annual report stated that 43% of all students enrolled on college campuses in 2007 were in their mid-20s or older. Of this population, the majority were women.

Adult female students are “racially diverse, particularly with growing numbers of Black women” (Thomas, 2001, p. 140). Black women are different, unique (Johnson-Bailey, 1994; Thomas, 2001, Sealey-Ruiz, 2007b). They enter higher education with a different profile, which alters how they perceive and experience the journey.

A Womanist Profile – Framework

1. A black feminist or feminist of color. 2. A woman who loves other women, sexually and/or nonsexually. Appreciates and prefers women's culture, women's emotional flexibility, and women's strengths. Sometimes loves individual men...

Committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female. Not a separatist, except periodically, for health. Traditionally universalist ... 3. ... Loves the Spirit. ...

Loves struggle. Loves the Folk. Loves herself. Regardless ...4. Womanist is to feminist as purple to Lavender. (Walker, 1983, p. 1)

Black women’s encounter with oppression and marginalization suggest that theories of feminism can be seen as “divisive, white importations that further fragment an already divided and embattled front” (Williams, 1986, p.117). Alice Walker’s 1983 novel, In Search of Our
Mother’s Gardens: Womanist Prose introduced the idea of how many Black women identify and define themselves. Walker (1983) explained womanism through a four-part definition with various subgroups that poetically profiles the Black woman, distinguishing her from others. In explaining how Black female adult learners differ from white men and women, their Black male counterparts, and other persons of color, “the word womanist incorporates the complexity of life as an African American woman and mirrors both the language and principles of the African American community” (Taylor, 1998, p. 56).

Black Feminist or Feminist of Color

Everyone knows how we white people feel, the glorified Mammy figure who dedicates her whole life to a white family. Margaret Mitchell covered that. But no one ever asked Mammy how she felt about it, (Stockett, 2009, p. 277).

Collins (1986, 1991, & 2000) wrote that there is an underlying issue that has always existed: Black females are outsiders. Black females as members of academe feel at the same time alone, absent, and invisible. As Collins (1991) described it, “Because elite white men and their representatives control structures of knowledge validation, white male interests pervade the thematic content of traditional scholarship. As a result, Black women’s experiences with work, family, motherhood, political activism, and sexual politics have been routinely distorted in or excluded from traditional academic discourse” (p. 201). This assessment, whether real or imagined in the minds of Black females, does have validity (Burke, Cropper, & Harrison, 2000). To acknowledge the circumstance, Black feminist scholars developed theoretical concepts to consider the lives of Black women.

Black Feminist Thought (BFT) is “situated in the African American experience and link such experiences to larger structural constraints” (Taylor, 1998, p. 54). BFT clarified the
standpoint of Black women because it is created by Black women, is based on experiences that can be commonly shared by the collective group, and forms universal themes that can be shared in various genres (Collins, 1986). A Black feminist perspective values and centers Black women and empower them with the right to interpret their reality and define their objectives. Collins wrote that valuable knowledge is located within those who live the experience. Black women do ethically and morally produce “fact and theory” (p. 16), bringing about clarity, validity, and honesty in their voice.

The Help, a novel by Kathryn Stockett (2009), examined how Black females have integrated into White society, and yet are outsiders. Black women become, as Collins (1986) noted, “honorary members of the family” (p. 14). Collins (1986) defined this as the “outsider within” (p. 14). She further asserts, "At the core of Black feminist thought lie theories created by African-American women who clarify a Black women's standpoint—in essence, an interpretation of Black women's experiences and ideas by those who participate in them" (Collins, 1991, p. 15). Womanism is such a theory, and Collins (1986) argued that “Black female intellectuals have made use of their marginality, their outsider within status to produce Black Feminist Thought (BFT) that reflects a special standpoint on self, family, and society” (p. 14).

**Appreciates Women – Culture, Emotion, Strength**

*I'm a woman

Phenomenally.

Phenomenal woman,

That's me.

( Angelou, 1994, p. 130)
The struggle for Black women is not only for their race, but their gender. Black women appreciate everything there is regarding their womanhood and what it means to be female (Angelou, 1994). Black women are diverse within their own culture (Mays, 1985). Praising their own identity, promoting discussion amongst one another and strategizing how they can build relationships to make them stronger as women is very significant. Collins (1991) wrote that the woman-to-woman relationships are formed individually, through family, the church, and Black female groups and organizations. The establishment of these relationships promotes self-definition, self-esteem, self-worth, and value (Collins, 1991).

Mother-daughter relationships are a main avenue for passing on the appreciation of being a Black woman, (Collins, 1991; Sealey–Ruiz, 2005). Collins (1991) reflected even on the influence that Alice Walker’s mother had on her. She quoted what Mary Helen Washington (1975) stated about Walker and her reflections about her mother: “[She] doubted her powers of judgment because her mother assumed that they were sound; she never questioned her right to follow her intellectual bent, because her mother implicitly entitled her to it” (p. 102).

Relationships among friends are also significant in Black womanhood. Lorde (1984) explained that Black women bond in support of one another, for empowerment, encouragement, and wisdom. The connection brings about joys, laughter, conversation, growth, and well-being (Collins, 1991). Black women learn from one another, appreciating who they are (Collins, 1991; Lorde, 1984).

Sometimes Loves Men

Many Black female adult learners are attending school without established male companionship. A startling statistic shows that more households in the Black community are single-parent homes with 54% of Black children living with only their mothers (Rosiak, 2012).
This circumstance suggests that Black men and women are unable to reconcile issues or communicate to keep the relationships honest and strong (Collins, 1991; Perrault, 2009). Other studies reveal that Black women are earning college degrees, however, their preferred mate, and Black men, are not present (Stanley, 2011). The rise in Black male crime, imprisonment, and poverty have left them absent (Stanley, 2011; Williams, 2011).

Historically, Black women have felt angry, as they habitually did not put themselves before the men they chose to love (Collins, 1991). Perrault (2009) argued that Black women sacrificed for men and family before they sacrificed for self. They felt as if they have missed opportunities and severed dreams, hopes, futures, and children (Collins, 1991). This was ultimately a plausible factor for returning to school (Johnson-Bailey, 1998; Coker, 2003). In fact, a recent poll reported in The Grío, revealed that Black women are opting out of marriage to “advance their careers and avoid heart ache” (Lucas, 2013).

Black women however still believe in love. By the time Black women are in their mid-fifties they do marry, particularly Black men (Stanley, 2011). This statistic alluded to what Ekeigwe and Lockhart (2011) suggested as never giving up and believing in the premise of marriage. Therefore ultimately, their commitment and dedication to education is also not only for self, but the community, their children, and the men they love (Bolds, 2009; Philips, 2006; Stanley, 2011).

**Committed to the Community**

Womanist epistemology allows Black or non-White women to have voice while being committed to “social justice, transformation, and self-discovery” (Taylor et al., 2008, p. 343). Walker’s definition of womanism not only focused on the woman herself, but allowed the establishment of growth and development—teachings of one woman to another, a mother to her
daughter, and a professor to her student. Black women are strongly dedicated to not only their personal gain, but that of community. Their focus is for the totality and survival of a race, culture, and group.

Womanism, profiles a Black woman to be female–centered, yet looking beyond self to “conditions, events, meanings, and values that have crystallized in the African-American community” (Williams cited in Taylor, 1998, p. 56). Womanism includes men, children, and community. Black women are representatives of the whole. In agreement with Taylor (1998), Philips (2006) explained that womanism is having the perspective for social change. Black women aim to develop methods, create solutions that “extended to the problem of ending all forms of oppression for all people, restoring the balance between people and the environment/ nature, and reconciling human life with the spiritual dimension” (Philips, 2006, p. xx).

Loves – Spirit, Self, Struggle

Relating spirituality to most Black women’s life has been pivotal in Black culture. Patton and McClure (2009) explained:

Throughout history, particularly during slavery, Blacks have held strong spiritual beliefs and convictions. They had to be spiritual beings and in touch with their spiritual selves to survive the hate, turmoil, racism, and destruction of their masters ....Spirituality continues to be a strong influence and major cornerstone among African-Americans. For Black women, spirituality is a means of negotiation and understanding in order to deal with the issues, struggles, and forms of oppression faced on a day-to-day basis. (p. 42)

Williams and Wiggins (2010) noted womanist profiles carry a spiritual focus that “moves the individual towards knowledge, love, meaning, hope, transcendence, connectedness and compassion that is central to African American culture” (p. 177). They contended that the very
essence of womanism allows Black women to “escape the untenable double of multiple stigmas” and become committed to survival and emotional strength (p.177). Spirituality is a source that intertwines that strength and the faith of Black women empowering them to love God, self, and their community creating a level of self-determination to overcome situations (Phillips, 2006; Taylor, 1998; Williams & Wiggins, 2010).

As a student, having this womanish position becomes therapeutic for Black women. Black females are able to connect the current struggle with what they have always known regarding their relation to society (Williams & Wiggins, 2010). Black women love the situation in-spite of levels of marginality. They carry a mind-set—not to be defeated (Phillips & McCaskill, 1995).

**Purple is to Lavender**

...*I tried as hard as possible to keep the two worlds separate, to act as though my less than optimal grades (despite my "stellar" intellect) had nothing to do with the fact that I could not afford the textbooks and had no food in the refrigerator, and as though my "strange" way of raising my kids had nothing to do with the fact that I was being trained as a developmental psychologist .... (Phillips & McCaskill, 1995, p.1007)*

Phillips and McCaskill (1995) presented a powerful essay on how Black women have found womanism to help articulate and embrace how their everyday life is separate and disconnected to the live life in which they live in the academy. Walker’s metaphor regarding the various shades of purple can be interpreted in many ways. One perspective is to address the dichotomy of Black women’s lives. Living in a dual world is a reality. Having the triple bind of race, class, and gender, Black women had to assimilate to the white world, and yet, also live in their Black world (Hacker, 1995). In both worlds, Black females “are situated on the lowest
rung, in the lowest class in both societies, and not accepted into full membership in either” (Thurston, 2005, p. 174). They struggle to find their place, feel equal, and accepted. But the experience makes them unique, similar, but not the same. It leaves them with a story to tell.

**Historical Outlook of the Collegiate Experience**

Literature regarding Black female adult learners did not truly blossom until the mid-1980s. There are, however, significant studies that provide insight on the Black female collegiate experience. This section of the literature will review past studies prior to the mid-1980s to help provide a historical view of the journey for Black females.

Early studies of Black females that account for their experience and overall journey in higher education were initially captured in Marian Cuthbert’s 1942 work and updated in 1987. Cuthbert’s study, *Education and Marginality: A Study of the Negro Woman College Graduate*, focused on the obstacles and circumstances Black women faced, acknowledging the presence of gender inequity, stress, and family and academic imbalance (as cited in Johnson-Bailey, 1994). She noted the inequalities that Black women faced on college campuses. Unless they attended Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), they were isolated. They felt like outsiders and strongly felt the presence of racism and sexism. They lived in dual worlds, having to balance that of student and family member, mother, spouse. Many of the women also had social obligations and felt that being in school was not only for them but family and community. Cuthbert wrote, "They are lonely in a world in which they are striving to become acquainted. There is no complete returning to the world they have left; there is no complete entering into the new world" (as cited in Johnson-Bailey, 1994, p. 26).

Cuthbert made four recommendations regarding her findings. She encouraged Black college women to assume leadership roles in their communities, to invest in self, and to continue
to uplift Black people. Cuthbert also suggested that Black females build relationships with White women, forming new partnerships and networks; that they continue to value self-worth, progressing not only for self, but all Black women; and that they remain mindful of the circumstances of Black males.

Another assessment of Black women in the early years of higher education is the noteworthy study by Jeanne L. Noble (1956), *The Negro Woman’s College Education*. Noble wrote one of the first books to comprehensively research the education of Black women in both HBCUs and PWIs. Her focus on women in the late 1950s discussed the issues of race and gender and how they affected women from a psychological and physical position (Gassman, 2007; Johnson-Bailey, 1994).

Noble’s work, unlike that of Cuthbert, directly analyzed how gender within the Black race factored into the educational path of Black females. Noble also expressed that Black women of the 1950s felt excluded; they were outcasts to Black men and White women. She further claimed Black women were in school not only to learn, but also to better themselves for professional purpose. The women of the study expressed that above all attending higher education was mostly for finding a job and that colleges and universities should be preparing them for exactly that reason.

Noble examined that Black women outnumbered Black men in higher education. Her research revealed was a high need for school teachers. Black women enrolled in higher education more to seek a degree for the teaching profession more than any other career opportunity. She also discovered that regardless of academic advancement, holding a degree still limited Black females to certain positions, such as teaching, administrative assistant, and low-paying non-distinguished positions.
Finally, Noble pointed out a harsh reality: as a result of the oppression faced from race and gender bias, Black females suffered. Family related issues such as spousal issues, children, finances, and self-evaluation challenged their journeys.

Nadene Samuel and Dorothy Laird (1974) focused their work on “The Self Concepts of Two Groups of Black Female College Students.” They “compared seven dimensions of the concept of black females” at a PWI and an HBCU (p. 229). They noted that Black females who chose to attend a PWI had more self-esteem and possibly better experience in dealing with their white peers. However, both groups were significantly aware of self, making the journey manageable. Once enrolled at a PWI, the women in this study reported that they suffered with their image because of the “constant comparison with white females” (p. 231).

Studies released in the early 1980s focused more on Black students as a whole as many PWIs were addressing the needs of retention. However, specific facts during this timeframe are of importance. Students were attending more and more PWIs and the overall collegiate experience differed for Black females depending on the type of college environment they were in. Issues of self-esteem, academic achievement, finances, and social integration were growing concerns (Allen, Epps, & Haniff, 1991). Fleming (1984) piloted a study on Black students at HBCUs and PWIs. In his work, he reveals that Black females felt incompetent and undervalued “regardless of the type of college they attended,” (Johnson-Bailey, 1994, p. 31). Furthermore, Moses (1989) identified the experience of Black females as one of difficulty and loneliness.

**Overview of the Experiences of Black Female Adult Learners**

This section of the literature review is designed to provide an overview of the experiences of Black female adult learners. The below referenced material spans from initial data collected on Black female adult learners to more recent articles written specifically on the population.
By 1986, Black students made up 8.6% of the total undergraduate enrollment, but Black women totaled 59.6% of the total Black undergraduate enrollment (Moses, 1989). Black women were enrolling not only as traditionally-aged students, but adult learners, and part-time students (Henry, 1985; Johnson-Bailey, 1994). This influx provided opportunity to capture the experience of an emerging population on campus.

Studies regarding Black female adult learners blazed new trails with a primary focus on them as Black reentry women. Black reentry women were defined as women who returned to school at a later age with specific needs (Johnson-Bailey, 1994). The first research study to focus entirely on Black reentry women was conducted by Mildred Henry (1985). Her research assessed 113 Black female graduate students and how they perceived their return to higher education. Henry focused on Black reentry women as a group, providing the socioeconomic status, educational history, and their perceived outlook, but she did not detail the experiences of these women and how they dealt with their academic survival. Her recommendations were to challenge higher education to develop resources and strategies to accommodate the growing population; this included the enhancement of staff and cultural understanding.

A groundbreaking study by Juanita Johnson-Bailey was conducted in 1994. Johnson-Bailey, having looked at past research extensively, completed a dissertation on Black reentry women. She examined the educational narratives of Black women and found that Black reentry women above all, did recognize that they were facing racism and sexism. Johnson-Bailey (1994) discussed that women felt as if they were the outsider within (Collins, 1986), understanding that the environment in which they were not that of their own. The participants of Johnson-Bailey’s study also expressed the effects of racism, issues of gender inequality, and class stating that they always felt apart from others, feeling separate and inferior. They named
racism as power and believed that it carried a barrier or constraint upon them. As women, they felt the pressures of feeling inferior and of no worth. This feeling exemplifies Lerner’s contention. Lerner studied Black women in White America initially in 1992. In her extensive research on racial profiling and gender inequity, she found that Black women were “subject to all the restrictions against Blacks as well as those against women,” (as cited in Zamani, 2003, p. 7).

Johnson–Bailey’s (1994) also discussed the reentry process and the motivation to return to school. She noted that most of the women in her study reentered college to “make a way out of no way” (p. 172). The women expressed that this was an act that required strength and endurance, although family and community support were not necessarily there. All of the women had to balance work, family, and school under a full course load. The option to not work was not available. Some expressed the fear of achievement and others the fear for lack of support. Some participants took leadership roles to better connect and feel as if they had a place as a student. All in some way expressed their faith in God as an avenue for coping.

Extending the research of Johnson-Bailey (1994), Thomas (2001) focused on the educational experiences and transitions of reentry college women. In an article published by the Journal of Negro Education, Thomas revealed the findings of a study of 147 women enrolled in weekend collegiate program. Her work agreed with the similar statistics of Henry (1985) and Johnson-Bailey (1994) showing that the average age was 39 years and more than half were single. Over 60% of the women for her study were parents and over 90% of the participants carried full-time jobs.

Thomas looked at the motivations and challenges Black women face when returning to school. Thomas found that 43% of the women believed obtaining a degree was extremely
important and having the desire at a later age in life provided more focus and the will to achieve the goal.

One of the main purposes for going back to school, for most, was to advance professionally. Others expressed attending for personal satisfaction, yet a larger constituency stated that their children were the main motivator expressing the need to be “good role model[s]” and to be able to support their children (p. 143).

Over 74% of the women in Thomas’s study noted conflict emerged when balancing the role of student and the other aspects of their lives. Women struggled with marriage and with raising their children. Some reported that there was lack of support from their spouse and workplace, while others expressed concerns about financial challenges.

While negatives clearly existed, participants in the study also pointed out positives. They expressed that reentering school brought about self-esteem, pride, and direction. Some stated that the choice helped them grow mentally and physically as well and helped them define purpose for their lives.

Coker’s (2001) study also examined Black female adult learners in higher education. The purpose of her work was to explore their experience and examine the “motivations, challenges and sources of their strength” (p. 9). She examined the effect of a focus group as a support base during the academic journey. Various themes emerged from her study. The participants were motivated to return to college in for the development of self, family, and the community. The experience also made them confident and empowered. They believed that education was a “natural pursuit” and “an act of self-will and self-empowerment of the soul and of the spirit” (p. 66). By being determined to achieve their goal, Coker (2001) stressed that the
Black female adult learners were aggressive and were the rulers of their own destinies despite the conceptions of race, gender, and class.

Like Thomas, Coker (2001) noted the participants experienced feelings of being overwhelmed and having difficulty balancing school and the daily responsibilities of life. They explain the journey was not just theirs but that of their children, family, and community. Their achievement would encourage their children to stay in school and pursue dreams. For others, they were the first to obtain a degree and the accomplishment was not only theirs, but a representation of their parents and relatives who may not had had the opportunity to attend college. It also allowed them to share their skills within a community, which brought about an identity as leaders and political activist. They saw their participation as a way of giving back, acknowledging that their success was communal and for the good of all within.

Coker’s (2001) categorized and titled challenges found in her study as “marginalized” (p. 82). She looked at the components of race, gender, and being an adult learner to access how these three levels of marginalization affected the academic experience. What she found was that the source of their survival was “strength, independence, spirituality, diversity, beauty, and wisdom” (p. 83). Most women felt excluded from the larger university; they felt “set apart” from others (p. 84). They were frequently stereotyped and their intellectual ability was constantly questioned. Like women in Henry (1985), Johnson-Bailey (1994), and Thomas (2001), they saw themselves in dual worlds living two separate lives.

One unique observation that Coker made unlike researchers before her was how the participants of her study coped with their struggles and joys. She found that humor, silence, compromise, and confrontation were what led them to get through the daily rituals of their lives.
A final study conducted by Sealey-Ruiz (2007b) focused more on culturally relevant curriculum (CRC) for Black female adult learners. This work was unlike other studies because it responded to the curricula designed at colleges and universities and whether they were addressing cultural relevant methods to educating groups that had been historically marginalized. Sealey-Ruiz (2007b) examined how Black women responded to a curriculum centered on their cultural understanding and how or what happens to them once exposed. Three themes emerged from the findings: 1) language validation – acknowledging both Standard English and Black English repertoire; 2) positive self and group identity – allowing them to alter the negative images into that of positive ones, making them comfortable and able to learn freely; and 3) self-affirmation and affirmation of goals – allowing for confidence, will, and empowerment to prevail.

As the women of Sealey-Ruiz’s (2007b) study expressed thoughts about CRC, they internalized what they were learning and used it to empower and fight against oppression, each of their narratives spoke freely of their reliability on God and spirituality. One participant captured this feeling eloquently as she responded to her reading of Nelson Mandela’s inaugural speech:

I do believe I have something to offer to this world, however I didn't always believe that. It took a horrendous life of drugs and degradation and then an ascend into a better life, through the grace of God, for me to understand that I am somebody that has something to offer this world. Through my writing, I'm hoping to do some good. If Nelson Mandela can overcome prison, and oppression, I think I can too. (Sealey-Ruiz, 2007b, p. 57)
These studies on Black female adult learners complement one another, reaffirming the condition and circumstances of Black female adult learners both good and bad. The research repeatedly noted that Black women have worked and struggled to educate themselves for self, community, and the greater whole. Common themes regarding oppression, circumstance, and coping appeared in various ways in the reviews. Through them all, regardless of the primary focus of the studies, one theme emerged—Black female adult learners are a spiritual group.

Her Spiritual Side

*In the African American community, spirituality is an integral part of the culture.* Historically speaking, spirituality has been used to encourage, comfort, and aid African Americans, allowing them to survive years of slavery, segregation, and discrimination. *(Tate, 2011, p.249-250)*

Definitions and understandings of the concept of spirituality vary. For some, it is the encompassing nature of spirit with a focus on consciousness to empower and influence (Dillard, 2006). For others, as hooks (2000) suggested, spirituality commits to a particular paradigm giving honor to the principles of interconnectedness and the inner being. Patton and McClure (2009) further shared that spirituality involves an individual process, communion with others, and relationship with something greater than oneself. It may emphasize the in-depth meaning and purpose of life (Wright, 2000) or it may be “a way of being present to the profound realities of one’s world” (Starratt, 2004, p. 67).

Bender (2007) contended that the separation of spirituality and religion is a modern-day stance primarily in the United States. He explained that research historically has used religion and spirituality interchangeably, yet in more recent times, the meaning of spirituality differs from religion. Bender looked at the following three ideologies of spirituality: 1) “Spiritual but not
religious,” that denotes a strong direct and untainted relationship with a higher being or entity exempt of religious affiliation and control; 2) “Spirituality as the ‘individual’ part of religion,” which situates religion as a manmade notion and the individual’s spirituality as an expression of religion; and 3) “Spirituality ‘more than’ religion,” indicating that it is the essence or source of all religious traditions (p.5).

In the African American community spirituality has bearing on every aspect of the lives of African American people (Mattis, 2002; Newlin, Knafl, & Melkus, 2002). Black women hold spirituality as an embedded part of their being (hooks, 2000; Mattis, 2000; Newlin et al., 2002; Patton &McClure, 2009; Walker, 1983). The profile of Black women identifies that they love their spiritual side (Mattis, 2000, 2002; Walker, 1983). Black females are the dominant ones who attend church, participate in religious activities, and evangelize in the community (Mattis, 2000; Walker, 1983). Black women have used their spiritual base to overcome health issues such as cancers and depression (Lewis, Hankin, & Ogedegbe, 2007; Tate, 2011), and they pride themselves on raising their children in spiritual environments (Lewis et al., 2007).

Two studies clearly explored how Black females define and conceptualize spirituality. Of those two, the participants were primarily Black female adult learners (Mattis, 2000). In most Black communities, spirituality is part of the home, the neighborhood, and the culture. In many ways, spirituality is supposed to simply be understood and defined. Yet, Lewis, Hankin, and Ogedegbe (2007) and Mattis (2000) explored what spirituality meant for Black women. Their research speaks to living a spiritual life more than her male counterpart or White male and females (Lewis et al., 2007).

spirituality mean to you?” The written narratives varied in size and depth revealing thirteen categories that were frequently observed in the coding of the narratives: 1) Had a connection to or belief in a God or a higher power; 2) Was cognizant of good and bad energies, spirits; 3) Was self-aware, self-affirmed, and self-loved; 4) Used spirituality is a guide; 5) Allowed spirituality to stimulate peace, serenity, and comfort; 6) Shaped interactions socially and permits forgiveness; 7) Provided reason for existence and purpose; 8) Empowered; 9) Aided in strength to finding ways to overcome obstacles; 10) Linked to faith and manifesting positive results; 11) Was unexplained, could not be defined; 12) Promoted positive feelings; and 13) Brought about clarity and wisdom.

Other studies that have observed spirituality for Blacks or explicitly Black women have observed this as well. Berkel, Armstrong, and Cokley (2004) stated that spirituality establishes a relationship with God or Supreme Being that helps bring understanding and meaning to life. Newlin, Knafl, and Melkus (2002) explained that spirituality carries a connection with God, others, or a higher power in order to empower, transform, and free oneself from adversity.

Lewis, Hankin, and Ogedegbe (2007) discovered the connection to God as well in their study. While their work focus was on Blacks men and women with serious medical issues, it nonetheless defined spirituality for African Americans as a journey. They found that spirituality was love in action, relationships and connections, and unconditional love. Love in action referred to identifying a spiritual person. “How does one know that a person is spiritual?” (p. 18). The participant’s response unveiled that random acts of kindness, having an open heart and the desire to give freely was a large component, and willingness to share personal experience are reflections of spirituality. Relations and connections meant that the respondents viewed spirituality as a relationship with self, others, and God that brought about strength, faith, and
positive synergy. Spirituality as unconditional love represented love for all persons regardless of race, gender, religion, creed, or health.

Walker (1983) indicated Black females are indeed kind, willing, of God, strong, in love, of love, and open to serve all mankind regardless of circumstance. Thus, the results presented by Mattis and Lewis, Hankin, and Ogedegbe (2007) supported Walker’s (1983) writings and reiterated how research indicates Black women’s strong connection to spirituality.

Summary

*Who am I?*

*How do you define me?*

*Are there discussions regarding me?*

*Research conducted on me?*

*Conclusions made about me?*

(Self)

The review of literature was designed to help capture a glimpse of four major components regarding Black female adult learners; 1) their womanist profile, 2) a generalized historical view Black women in higher education, 3) research specifically geared to Black female adult learner in higher education through the years, and 4) a synopsis of their documented connection to spirituality.

By incorporating Walker’s (1983) theoretical perspective on womanism, a defined profile was presented to help the reader better understand the conditions, characteristics, and circumstances of Black female adult learners in relation to this study. Furthermore, the womanist profile encompasses the outsider within status that Collins (1986, 1991, & 2000) portrayed in order to connect the two cultures of being students and Black females in America. It also enabled
the women of this study to have a validated voice, meaning that their words were noteworthy and justifiable to be used as research.

The second component of the literature review shared a historical aspect of Black female women and the collegiate experience. Key reasons for the inclusion of this section was to establish a clear understanding of the successes, challenges, reasons and outcomes for Black women attending school while bound to three significant stigmas of race, gender, and class. In continuing to explore literature regarding Black female adult learners, the third section focused on painting a clear portrait of Black female adult learners by including as much research found regarding the population.

Last, a section on spirituality, how it is defined and its relation to Black women, specifically, Black female adult learners. Exploring spirituality within the review of literature allowed a foundation to be established in relations to the study.
CHAPTER III: METHODOLOGY AND PROCEDURE

This research study used two qualitative research methods – narrative inquiry and autoethnography. “Narrative inquiry reveals women’s narrative processes as reflecting and reproducing the subordinated position of women in many societies and uncovers forms of agency, resistance, reclamation and mastery” (Sullivan & Stevens, 2010). Narratives emphasize the contextual nature of oral stories that are “strategic, functional, and purposeful” (Given, 2009). Autoethnography is derived from ethnography overlapping of both self (auto) and culture (ethno) (Ellis, 2004). It is a method that enables the researcher to integrate personal experience into the study. Autoethnography not only allows for in-depth reflexivity, but searches for social and cultural issues, allowing the researcher to observe the issue from a comprehensive lens (Hamilton, Smith, & Worthington, 2008). Adapting both methodologies provided the ability to capture multiple layers of consciousness and to make sense of the participants’ words and encounters from a social and cultural perspective (Chang, 2008; Ellis, 2004).

Rationale for Qualitative Design

Qualitative research is a heavily used design of study that does not require the collection and analysis of quantitative data. It engages several methods for the interpretation of human phenomena; observation of natural settings for the collection of data; and generating rather than testing theory (Burgess & Bryman, 1999). Qualitative research can refer to the experiences, narratives, and physiognomies of people; social change; interactional relationships; or organizational functioning (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). This study explored and made sense of the lives of Black female adult learners, investigated how they defined spirituality, and used their spiritual perspective throughout their academic journey through testimonial narratives (Lewis et al., 2007; Mattis, 2000; Witherspoon, 2008).
Narrative Inquiry: I Call It Testifying

Some of the stories are funny, some sad; some elicit outrage and praise from the group.


Narrative inquiry at its core means comprehending and making sense of participants’ experiences through story (Andrews, Squire & Tambokou, 2008; Trahar, 2009). Squire (2008) argued that narrative inquiry should be a chronological and meaningful presentation or representation to the experience and exhibit transformation. Squire’s culturally based research used narrative inquiry to capture the concept of Nash (2004), who emphasized that narratives should be liberating. Squire contended that narratives are a way in which individuals interpret themselves and the world.

Narrative inquiry is rooted in phemenology and hermeneutics. Phenomenology is the study of structures of consciousness as experienced from the first-person point of view or lifeworld (“Phemenology”, 2010). Husserl examines lifeworld as an entity that is natural and does not tamper with theoretical thoughts and interpretations (as cited in Givens, 2009). Hermeneutics also suggested that the implication of one’s experience is studied and the texts of life interpreted (Hatch, 2002; Patton, 1990). In other words the researcher must know and understand some aspect, have some concept and reference of something or culture in order to interpret its meaning (Patton, 1990).

Taylor (1998) suggested that the researcher has to be able to “bear witness”—translate what is seen and heard. The researcher must be a participant in order to attest to the facts and events. This hermeneutic practice is heavily used in the Black community (Taylor, 1998; Witherspoon, 2008). To “bear witness” means to testify. Testifying means to bring forth or
proclaim one’s individual experiences or that of others (Taylor, 1998). The researcher then identified her narrative and that of the participants as testimonials.

Presenting narratives as testimonials from a spiritual stance provides a sense of identity, community, and a basis for conduct and explanations for life which gives meaning to lives (Nash, 1998; Postman, 1996). The art of narrative can acknowledge the personal, professional, and social activities of Black women who testify on how their beliefs and values expose themselves through their language, thoughts, and actions (Floyd-Thomas, 2006).

Testimonies typically have religious or spiritual connotations (Witherspoon, 2008). Floyd-Thomas (2006) expressed that testimony is a proclamation of a supreme being that intervenes as challenges and obstacles arise. Taylor (1998) pointed out that testimony also acts as an empowering method for participants to tell their stories and acting as a representation of those who cannot (Taylor, 1998). Testimonials can frequently be “an expressive act of resistance against larger social forces of oppression (Taylor, 1998, p. 56).

Historically, Black womanist narratives are grounded in personal histories of racism, classism, and sexism, as well as experiences of marginality and alienation (Omolade, 1987). Black (1999) wrote that narratives of Black women carry a bond that is established between them and God. It increases their faith and strengthens the relationship with God (Black, 1999; Collins, 1991, 2000; Tisdell & Tolliver, 2003). This active relationship engenders a sense of self-worth and forms a primary means for coping with hardship (Black, 1999, p. 364).

Black women seldom are given the opportunity to share their experience with oppression through their own voice. They, at many times, have been grouped with women in general, especially with White women. Black women being simultaneously a member of a group and yet standing apart from it, forms an integral part of Black women’s conscious (Collins, 2000). By
negotiating everyday life, it is important that society recognizes the dynamics that changes the narrative or “story” of the Black female adult learner.

**Autoethnography**

Autoethnography has emerged as a validating qualitative method that allows voice for the researcher and participants (Cozart, 2010; Given, 2009; Neyman, 2011). Autoethnography engages the collection of data, analysis, and interpretation of self and social phenomena involving self (Given, 2009). The researcher is the subject and the object creating a credible methodology (Hamilton, 2011). Chang (2008) and Ellis (1997) claimed that auto-ethnography promotes better understanding of ourselves within a multicultural world and is an appropriate research method for education.

Autoethnography focuses on “meaningful and evocative” research that allows the researcher to introduce to readers issues with a social agenda, express narratives of populations who are generally silenced, and introduce creative styles of writing that allow for empathy of individuals different from others (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2010, p 105).

Autoethnography gives the researcher the opportunity to focus on the “I” (Ellis, 2004). However, unlike autobiography, the researcher does not solely focus on self, but also attempts to interpret experiences from a greater social context. Autoethnography is typically presented as short-stories, poetry, journal entries, and fragments of writing (Chang, 2008; Ellis, 2004, Hamilton et al., 2008). Its ability to introduce creativity however, does not deny the research of critical data analysis (Chang, 2008; Ellis, 2004, Hamilton et al., 2008).
Analytical-Interpretive Typology

...look at experience analytically. Otherwise [you're] telling [your] story—and that's nice—but people do that on Oprah [a U.S.-based television program] every day. Why is your story more valid than anyone else's? What makes your story more valid is that you are a researcher. You have a set of theoretical and methodological tools and a research literature to use. That's your advantage. If you can't frame it around these tools and literature and just frame it as 'my story,' then why or how should I privilege your story over anyone else's I see 25 times a day on TV?... (personal interview with Mitch Allen, 2006, as cited in Ells et al., 2010, p. 56)

The creativity and uniqueness of autoethnographies is that it frees researchers from traditional academic writing allowing expression to be exemplified in various ways. Chang (2008) presented “four types of writing styles that can be applied to autoethnography: descriptive-realistic, confessional–emotive, analytical–interpretive, and imaginative-creative” (p. 143). This study adopted the analytical–interpretive style of writing, which analyzes the cultural experiences of a person’s autobiography around a conceptual framework. The goal of interpretive writing is to highlight the essential factors and connect the fragments of the data (Chang 2008).

Anderson’s (2006) portrayed five main points for presenting an analytic autoethnography:

- the researcher is a member of the social group under study;
- the researcher includes forms of reflexivity, establishing the connections of self and participants;
- the researcher is present within the narrative;
• the researcher engages in dialogue with participants beyond the self; and
• the researcher commits to theoretical analysis.

This method of writing discussed specific matters that had implications for a “broader societal issue” (Chang, 2008, p. 147). The strategy was important because it helped address the goals of the study, which were to describe how the experiences and the spiritual consciousness of Black female adult learners influenced their academic journey. It also brought about connections and clarity of my own experience and spiritual perspective as a member of the aforementioned group.

Autoethnography, Spirituality, Higher Education: Relating the Three

Scholars have argued that there is a rise in students exploring their spiritual side (Bender, 2007). Tisdell, (2008) argued that there is a need for higher education to acknowledge this phenomenon. With the change in demographics, examining spirituality can provide an in-depth cultural understanding of collegiate students.

Chang (2011) suggested “autoethnography should be added to the methodological repertoire for spirituality research in higher education” (p. 21). She argued this point for two reasons: (1) to allow the recognition of spirituality from a scholarly perspective as a significant part of a person’s being and as a connection to one’s culture (Chang, 2011; Tisdell, 2008), and (2) autoethnography enables the researcher to study his or her individual spirituality and examine spirituality in context—particularly a social one.

Embracing autoethnography as method for this study was a step toward acknowledging a marginalized group whose relation to spirituality is embedded deep within its principles. It also is the appropriate avenue for incorporating the narrative of the researcher and placing it into context of the larger social paradigm. Spirituality is a means of expression.
**Sampling**

Snowball sampling was used as the strategy for investigation. Snowball sampling allows a researcher to identify a potential participant and utilize their network to find others to recruit. The initial participant is known as the “seed” and allows the researcher to obtain subgroups who could be considered “hard-to-reach” (Sadler, Lee, Lim, & Fullerton, 2010, p.370).

According to Sadler et al. (2010), there are several benefits to considering this method of recruitment. For the researcher it reduces cost and time spent recruiting. Secondly, it increases the chances of having a more diverse group of participants. Third, participants are more effectively identified if there are multiple selection criteria. Last, trust is easier to build with participants if there is a pre-established relationship.

Noy (2008) noted that snowball sampling “relies [on] and partakes in the dynamics of natural and organic social networks” (p. 329). It is one of the most commonly employed methods of sampling for qualitative research (Noy, 2008; Sadler et al., 2010). However, snowball sampling can bear heavy consequences. The art of the exercise can make or break the research. Many times it is argued by researchers that the method of participant collection is too informal and a weak style or strategy for recruitment.

Snowball sampling, however, for studies such as this one allowed the researcher to identify a sub-group that can be difficult to find and challenging to unravel. Noy (2008) noted snowball sampling can also create a more “natural” process for interviewing. However, the researcher must choose this type of style with the understanding that the data collection must be “dynamic and holistic” (p. 334). Constant critical analysis is required when selecting a sample in such a way to eliminate misunderstanding and interpretation as information is typically passed through the seed and, therefore, from one individual to another.
The researcher must also be aware that communication and confidentiality must be protected at all time. The researcher must assure and be assured that all ethical guidelines are followed and the privacy of the participants is honored (Sadler et al., 2010).

The Participants

This study recruited four Black female adult learners who were currently enrolled or were recent graduates (within the past two years) of an undergraduate or a graduate degree program from various colleges and universities. They were selected based on this study’s definition of adult learners: 1) An individual beyond the age of 24, 2) One who has returned to school after experiencing a break between any education experiences, and, 3) One who has attempted to be financially independent or does not rely on parental support (Burns, 201; Coker, 2001).

Secondly, the participants had to be willing to share their experience in higher education, openly discuss their academic journey, and share their beliefs regarding spirituality. I found that several women were not willing to share much information that could possibly identify them. Even for the participants chosen, minimal information is disclosed that could connect them to a school, place of employment, or residential location. This decision was consciously made after a request for complete anonymity of one of the participants.

Recruiting was also difficult because many women who were initially considered were unable to commit to the interview. Conflicts with daily responsibilities, class schedules, finding baby-sitters, and working multiple jobs omitted several possible candidates for the study. While they may have had the desire to participate, their lifestyle limited availability.

Last, the research incorporated a fifth participant, the researcher to adhere to using autoethnography as method. Discussion around this process will be presented later in the chapter.
The Process

Data Collection

A total of five Black female adult learners were used for this study. This included the researcher. Semi-structured interviews guided this research. Questions were designed to initiate the narratives and gain initial responses from subjects outside of the researcher. The interviews took place over a four-month period. By using interviews as the instrument for data collection, in-depth information was obtained. The researcher attempted to conceptualize the participants within the context of a particular circumstance, bringing about in-depth dialogue about what they do and how they endure (Crouch & McKenzie, 2006, p. 493).

After agreeing to participate, the researcher sent an email to the participant with an attached informed consent document. This allowed each participant to have the opportunity to read the consent form, ask any questions, and sign and date the form. Participants were advised that they could redraw from the study at any time.

At the conclusion of the session, the researcher asked the participant if she had any final thoughts or comments. This typically opened up for more in-depth discussion regarding the experience (Patton, 1990). These discussions brought about new questions and elaboration on old ones (Squire, 2008). Prior to ending the interview, the researcher thanked the participant for participation and explained that after the data were analyzed there might be a need for follow-up for clarification or further information.

It was also expressed that the real names of the participants would not be shared. Each participant provided an alias name to be used throughout the study. In addition, identifiable information was removed from the study to protect each participant. Therefore, locations of
employment, schools attended, and other possible identifiable information was not presented in the results.

**Data Analysis**

Narrative analysis was used to interpret the subjects’ academic journey, experiences, and how spirituality influenced the educational process. Narrative analysis can “provide information about the perspectives of the individual in relation to the wider social grouping or cultural setting to which that individual belongs” (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996, p. 68). The narratives take on many forms, are told in many settings, before many audiences, and with various degrees of connection to actual events or persons (Burgess & Bryman, 1999, p. 465). The results establish “themes, metaphors, structure, and conclusion” (Burgess & Bryman, 1999). Although narrative analysis is not necessarily a standard method, ideology, theoretical foundation or framework, it has become a respected tactic for analysis in qualitative research (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996; Redwood, 1999).

Immediately after each interview, the researcher transcribed the digital recordings. The researcher had also recorded her story, so it too was transcribed. These data consisted of the actual recordings and documented observations in which the researcher was able to go back and associate with voice by capturing the time-stamp on the recorder. The information was then coded by hand. The researcher established a coding system using the research questions as a guide in order to better understand the phenomenon as it was unveiled through the narratives (Weston, Gandell, Beauchanp, McAlphine, Wiseman, & Beauchamp, 2001). The researcher initially had made a decision to code the work via Nvivo 8, a computer based analysis program for qualitative research. However, part of the process for autoethnography is looking at the work
of the participants and that of the researcher in a reflective way. Using a hardcopy of the transcribed text permitted reflexivity during the analysis process.

As the researcher studied the transcripts over and over, keeping the research questions as a frame of reference, categories and subcategories materialized. Further, themes emerged once the categories were established. The researcher adopted the strategy of Weston et al., (2001) and looked for themes that arose more than twice in relation to a category.

Three categories originated: Purpose, Change and Transformation, and God. An example of how the coding was structured is shown in Table 1 below. The table is an illustration of how a portion of the Purpose category was created. Two subcategories helped define the Purpose category and generate a coding system. The first research question sought to investigate the motivational factors for adult Black females returning to higher education. As the researcher read the transcripts, the researcher noted when the participants made reference to anything that was related to the question. What manifested were subcategories, motivation and reason, that helped identify the overall category on why Black females were returning to higher education, purpose. Structuring the coding system in this manner created hierarchical levels or what Weston et al., (2001) described as tiers.

Next, while sifting through the text a second time and listening to the transcripts, phrases and excerpts were noted and placed under one of the subcategories. This method not only helped in the discovery of the overall category, but aided in finding recurring patterns to pinpoint themes. This process was completed for each research question and a primary category was used to umbrella the subcategories found based on these data presented.
Table 1.

*Coding – PrimaryCat – Purpose*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SubCat - Motivation</th>
<th>SubCat - Reason</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><em>Family</em></td>
<td><em>Job</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family moved East to start over (S)</td>
<td>I want to do that. How can I do that? – “Get a degree.” (M)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not to benefit me, but others around me, especially my children (T)</td>
<td>Teach Special Ed Severe (T)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not just for me, but for my children (La)</td>
<td>Train for another career (L)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Incorporating the Researcher**

The researcher was also central to exploration acting as researcher, participant, and author. The recorded narrative for the researcher depended upon collected works to develop what Chang (2008) acknowledged as self-reflective data. Primary sources were through journal collections that had been created since the start of the academic journey. Letters, emails, notes (literally on scrap sheets of paper), messages and related literature were also used. These data were accumulated by the researcher throughout a 15-year period. This process attributed to the validity of the researcher’s story or “narrative truth” (Ellis, 1997, p. 129).

The researcher created an inventory chronicling events and related correspondence in order to better manage and organize the project (Chang, 2008). The researcher’s data were organized for the ability to connect her story and to develop her own personal time-lined events and reflections (Chang, 2008). Nash (2004) stated that creating a clear timeline of events serves as an instrument and foundation for educational auto-ethnographies. It also helped avoid bias on how the researcher would respond based on prior knowledge of the topic or the narratives of the interviewed participants.
Validation Method

The researcher used the conventional method of bracketing as a validation method to expose, delimit, and scrutinize the elements of the data (Patton, 1990). Bracketing disconnects the transcribed text from what has been documented by previous literature and meanings (Kramp, 2004; Patton, 1990). This process helped the researcher ignore any preconceptions, thus allowing documentation of “as much as possible, on its own terms” (Patton, 1990, p. 408).

Bracketing was extremely beneficial because the research topic was a very close and integral part of the researcher. It was easy for the researcher to have preconceived notions and assumptions. Yet, incorporating bracketing not only for analysis but for the preparation of writing the literature review and completing the data collection helped the researcher to alleviate any foreknowledge and preconception that could hinder the research from being viewed as phenomenological work (Hamill & Sinclair, 2010).

In order to achieve bracketing prior to the literature review and data collection, the researcher completed the following: 1) Wrote what she knew about the topic and any perceptions; 2) Revisited the literature review after the data collection to find if any questions hindered new outcomes because of existing literature; 3) Used committee members and support to provide feedback to verify the underlying purpose of the shared literature and the interpretation of these data collected; 4) Kept notes throughout the data collection process as a method of reflexivity; 5) Only asked questions beyond the survey guide (see Appendix D) when needed as a follow-up or to help elaborate. Completing steps one through four was used under the guidance of the work of Hamill and Sinclair (2010). Step five was used because of the researcher’s constantly tried to bracket assumptions, biases, personal experience, and perceptions and not coerce a specific response from the participants (Hamill & Sinclair, 2010; Patton, 1990).
For analysis, bracketing consisted of the following procedure which complimented the coding process: 1) The researcher located within the narratives key phrases that were directly related to the phenomenon in question; 2) The researcher interpreted the phrases being identified as a subject matter expert of the topic; 3) When possible, and needed, the researcher asked participants to interpret phrases; 4) The researcher examined the meaning and identified recurring elements; 5) The researcher wrote a statement or response about the recurring themes (Patton, 1990).

**Summary**

This chapter discussed the research strategy used to obtain five testimonials of Black female adult learners regarding their spiritual connection throughout their educational journey. Both the use of narrative inquiry and autoethnography, to include the author, were employed as qualitative design. Participants were selected through snowball sampling and interviews were conducted to capture data. The findings reared five narratives that were analyzed through coding and validated through bracketing.

The results and discussion are revealed in the succeeding chapters. To adhere to the analytical-interpretive writing technique that Chang (2008) suggested, the researcher took the position of both an ethnographer and an autoethnographer. As an ethnographer, the researcher results provided an in-depth description of the culture of Black female adult learners to help the reader understand the patterns and emerging themes derived from the evidence of the interviews and field notes (Ellis et al., 2010). As an autoethnographer, the researcher produced a rich description of personal and interpersonal experience that aided in creating a heartfelt and authentic story to help produce further insight to the socio-cultural group in question (Chang,
2008; Ellis et al., 2010). To provide an in-depth interpretation, literature was intertwined in the discussion to sustain the work.
CHAPTER IV: TESTIMONIES

This chapter represented the findings that were gathered during the data collection process. The research consisted of four interviews and one autobiographical presentation of the researcher. The results of this study were presented in two parts. First the demographic profile and educational outlook of each participant is shared in a table format in order to provide a graphic overview. Second, the testimonials of each are provided as oral presentations.

The first table consisted of a demographic sketch of the five participants for the study. Their names, ages, marital status, number of children and grandchildren, employment status and socio-economic backgrounds are included. The second table presented an educational outline for each participant. The type of institution, student status, grade level, major, and indication of financial support is shown.

The information included in the tables was collected from the completion of the demographic sheets and the interviews. These data were presented in a manner that quickly captured each participant in order to help identify with the testimonies. Providing this synopsis also enabled the researcher to summarize these data in a clear and concise visual manner.

Finally, the testimonials were ordered by age, with the exception of the researcher, whom is presented last. The women in this study presented their testimonies without hesitation, in truth, and as candidly as they could. Their words were with strong heart and mind, which allowed the rhythm of their tones to create spiritual poetry and gave them room to breathe and share their experience with no boundaries (Ellis, 2004). The testimonies were presented in first-person to freely express and represent their outsider within status (Collins, 1986; 1991; 2000; Witherspoon, 2008).
Table 1.

**Demographics – Visual Presentation of Participants**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Current Age</th>
<th>Current Marital Status</th>
<th>Children Own</th>
<th>Children Grandchildren</th>
<th>Employed</th>
<th>SES</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sasha</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>Re-married</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Full-time</td>
<td>Middle-Class</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mary</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>Full-time</td>
<td>Middle-Class</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Louise</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>Divorced</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>Worker’s Compensation</td>
<td>Middle-Class</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taylor</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Retired/ Full-time</td>
<td>Middle-Class</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LaShanta</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>Full-time</td>
<td>Middle-Class</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 2.

**Overview of Education**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Most Recent Institution</th>
<th>Student Status</th>
<th>Degree(s)</th>
<th>Degree Seeking</th>
<th>Current Field of Study</th>
<th>Received Financial Assistance</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sasha</td>
<td>Private Online</td>
<td></td>
<td>B.A.</td>
<td>M.S.</td>
<td>Human Resources</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mary</td>
<td>Private Online</td>
<td></td>
<td>M.A.</td>
<td>PhD</td>
<td>Education</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Louise</td>
<td>Private 4-Year</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>A.S.</td>
<td></td>
<td>Business Administration</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taylor</td>
<td>Public 4-Year</td>
<td></td>
<td>B.A.</td>
<td>Masters Certificate</td>
<td>Education</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LaShanta</td>
<td>Public 4-Year</td>
<td></td>
<td>B.A.</td>
<td></td>
<td>Education</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Sasha

Sasha was a 43-year-old mother of four who had spent the last seven years of her life in school. Sasha obtained her Associates degree and quickly advanced and completed her Bachelor’s degree. At the time of the interview, Sasha was enrolled in a Master’s program. My initial conversation with Sasha was brief because of her hectic schedule. Sasha worked extremely far from her home and typically spent five hours daily commuting to and from work. Sasha’s time was limited; therefore two additional discussions were needed to capture her entire testimony.

Sasha spoke candidly about her experience as she explained how spirituality had defined her life and guided her through her educational journey.

Sasha’s Story

I was born in Germany and lived there for the first nine years of my life. I was the oldest of three children. My father was military so we were privileged to travel all over the world. When my father finally decided to retire, the family ended up on the West Coast, which is where I called home.

I lived in the West for 26-years. I was raised in the Pentecostal church. My father was on the Board of Deacons and my mother was in charge of the “girls program.” She ran the ministry for over 20 years. We were heavily involved in church. We were at the church every time the doors were opened. As a young girl, I was committed to the church youth group. I also attended several missionary trips, was in the choir, and participated on the bible quiz team.

My educational experience was more than stellar. As a military child, I was exposed to some of the best private schools while living in various places. My father was a strong proponent of education and placed a high value on all of his children. He believed that receiving an
education would allow us to contribute to society. I fondly remember my father’s words. He always told us that “we needed to work to prove ourselves.” We were taught correct English and grammar in the house and my father was constantly correcting how we communicated. I laugh now because most people are surprised to see a Black woman based on how articulate I sound.

I started college right out of high school and then stopped suddenly just because I was not really focused. When I first went to school...ha! I wanted to just play. I really did not have any dedication or commitment to what I was doing. There was a lack of regard for the money my parents were spending, a lack of regard for the teachers who were wasting their precious energy trying to teach me, and a lack of appreciation for how the educational process could change my life.

I left school and at age 21 and decided to get married. Not long after having my daughter, I gave birth to my son and was a stay-at-home mom for seven years. Twelve years into the marriage, I was divorced. A few years later, I remarried and adopted two children. My second husband and I wanted more kids, but I was not able to have any more so we decided to adopt and provide a loving home. I did not foresee that relationship ending, but it did.

About seven years ago, I moved to the East Coast. My two oldest children were now in college. I moved with my younger children to simply relocate and start over. A short time after being in my new environment, I finally met my soul-mate. We have been married for five years. I am very happy.

I had made up my mind to finish school long before I remarried. However, I did not return to school until my children were fairly independent. I attended an online university where I received my Associates degree, then finished up my Bachelors. I am now enrolled in a Master’s program a different online university. The school has local satellite locations. I could sit in a
classroom, but I chose not to. The classes are typically made up of people who were from all over - Georgia, Tennessee, just all over. There have been very diverse groups of people. I could tell by the listed names of classmates. Statistically, there have been more minorities throughout in my Masters. In my undergrad, it was totally different. It has definitely been a journey. It is much harder to do it when you have life and responsibilities and it takes a lot more discipline.

**What I Believe**

I would define spirituality as believing in something that is higher than me. Having faith in something that I cannot see and believing in something that I cannot put my hands on. I was raised in the church so that will always be an influence. But, when I first got married, my husband at the time was really super spiritual and so he would ask me questions and he would say, “Well, why do you believe that?” He would really challenge me and play devil’s advocate. He did that for a really long time, so I found the things I thought I believed, I believed because that was how I was taught. What he did…he really forced me to think about why I believed and if I really believed the way I have been reared. If I did not, what did I believe? That was a huge growing experience for me. It is funny, I have had conversations with my parents and they still believe the same way they did when we were growing up. I have a little bit of a different take on what I now think versus on how I was raised. My parents are very strong in a denominational church and I go to a non-denominational. I am not as rigid in my thinking as I think they are. I feel that God gives us more grace. There is more grace involved and it is not all about rules and regulations. It’s about relationships and so that is kind of how I believe and look at things. My beliefs formed over the years. I am not holistic, I am not in a box, but I am also not new age either. I think that you should believe in God. There is only one.
See, I associate my spirituality somewhat with my religious beliefs. When I think about my spirituality, it is more of my relationship with God. How I learn and grow in that relationship is through the Bible which can be considered religious. So principles and foundations that is in that book kind of guide and dictates how I live my life.

**The Virtual Classroom**

My experiences as an online student make me want to go postal sometimes because of the ignorant things that people say. As online student, my interactions with my peers are all via blogs or postings. I do not know if they realize what they are saying. As an African American in a classroom with a mixed group, you are talking about touchy subjects. Many peers lack sensitivity class topics and they say whatever. It has me yelling at my computer as I am typing back. Sometimes I actually have to step back and read it and think, ‘You cannot send this like that!’ What checks me is my spirituality. Because I will say, ‘Is this going to offend someone and I become what others are?’ So, I go back and reword it and make it nice.

I like to think of myself as being very articulate in how I communicate. So I do not have that typical stereotype of, “Oh, she cannot even talk.” This will sound bad, but with interacting with people in my classes, it is easier to detect if they are Black. Like when we post questions. It’s easy to see the amount that they post and the conversation versus others. I can see that sometimes. But, again, because of how I speak, I do not have those issues.

In fact, I do not know if I have had the experience of being treated differently. I have not really had to deal with that – racism. But I also think that as we are moving to a more globalized society and have different mixes all over the world in class, so we learn. Everybody has their own believe system and when you merge all this together, you can really touch on stuff, and subjects, and content, and inner personal communication skills. I think that I always go back to,
‘treat them the way I would want to be treated’. That again is my spirituality that causes me to act and react in a certain way. It is not more so from a race standpoint, but a spiritual standpoint. Friends ask all the time, “Have you never been discriminated against?” I am like, “no.” It has not happened. If it has, I am just naïve to it. It has not been blatant enough for me to be offended. So, I am sure it has happened. I just have not noticed. I do see it however, when it happens to others.

**Spiritual Growth from the Class Experience**

Many times, I just struggle. I cannot find stuff to write the paper. I do not have enough time. I found that if I just keep my priorities straight then that helps me to get through the assignments and stay on top of the stuff I need to stay on top of. I eat well and exercise daily. I also try to make time for my family every weekend. I can do this because I have something to lean on, not just family, but some inner hope and inner peace. That comes from your spirituality. I find that people who are not spiritual, hardships come. So I ask, “What do you have to lean on and have hope in to get you through that”? It is really sad to me because lots of times, people do not have anything.

You cannot do anything without believing in something. I mean when you are worn, tired, stressed out, got all this homework, work is chugging at your heels, your kids have all these demands, and you got to go all over the place? You have to believe in something and you have to believe something is going to give you the strength to get to get through and get that work turned in. So, that is when I just say my little prayer and I say, okay God, and “Enlighten me.”

As I have aged, I respect the things that are in place. I ask educators to teach me something and I in turn, I am going to be respectful to them, responsible of their time and will
put forth what is needed to give quality work. Otherwise, it is not worth it. When you have an inner spirituality, I think you are more self-aware of how you impact others around you. So I want to always give my best. I really want to. In fact, it is almost to a fault. People tell me it does not have to be that way; you do not have to go that far. I am like, “Yeah I do!” It is just me. It is how I am. God has told me I need to do my best and I will.

Granted, there have been classes that I have not liked where I have struggled, but did I give my best? I think I gave my best. Do I think it could have been better? Sure, but it would have been a lot more effort and I did not have the time for it. I still do not feel like I slacked. I think I am a perfectionist by nature, so that is part of the issue and I think. In any case, my spirituality guides how I approach school.

**My Tomorrow**

Can I be a professional student forever? If I did not have the student loans, I would just always be in school the rest of my life. I would have multiple degrees in all kinds of areas I am interested in. But reality that is a whole different story. Eventually, I would like to use what I have learned to impact other people. My Master’s will be in Human Capital. I want to be able to reach, affect, manipulate, and guide people for the better. My spirituality plays a part in that. It has directed me in my degree choices and reminds me daily of why I am in school.

**Mary**

Mary was a 48-years-old, from a small Southern town, and is the older of two children. She was raised in a very loving household. Her parents were determined to make sure their children were well educated. As a teacher for the past seventeen years, Mary’s testimony intertwines her profession with her reason and need for returning to higher education. Mary’s
story was provided over two interviews. She shares openly her educational journey and vision for the future.

**My Academic Foundation**

I started my education in an era when public schools for Black students were hideous, awful. It was during a time when Black and White kids were integrating, especially in the Southern states. The system was terrible, so my mother took me out of public school and put me in a Catholic school. It was not for social reasons. My mother wanted me to have a good education. I was there to do well. We had nuns and we had discipline. It taught me self-control. I was very reserve and conscious about what I had to say. My plan, well my mother’s plan was “you are going to go to college no matter what.”

A lot of young ladies around my area were doing things that they should not have been doing which meant that they could not go to school. My mother said, “That is not going to be you. You will go to college!” In my 11th year, I took the PSAT and SAT. My mother and I also talked to my counselor. I did not really know about school choices and the process at the time. By November of my senior year, I knew I was going. Others did not, but I did. I was on my way.

I was accepted to a prestigious university in my state, but Black women did not go there. It was a Predominately White Institution and still majority female since it was originally a school only for women. I remember my roommate and I conversed over the summer and made plans for the fall. We exchanged pictures and stuff, so we would know each other and who to look for once on campus. Obviously she did not show her mother my picture. Here I am walking in the room, this sleek freshman, green as new money. Her mother takes one look at me and freaks out. I mean, I knew racism existed. I knew it existed, but to have someone blatantly look in your face and treat you like dirt? I was a strong person even then. I see it. I see it even now. I could have
said, “Mommy, take me home,” but I did not. I stayed. I stayed and it was a real good thing. I had a room all by myself. Actually, I was the only one to have a single room on my floor. I was the only Black on the floor and I got through it. I did what I had to do and I graduated.

I went home after graduation and did the job thing. I worked at a local, but very popular and well established, tourist site. When I applied for the job, I cannot tell you how many interviews I went on with the organization. Finally, I had to call because I heard no response.

I am a bold thing, so I asked, “When am I going to get a job?”

And the representative said, “We will bring you in for another interview.”

I said, “Fine.”

So I am there, waiting for my interview. I see walking up the steps a tall man - a tall white haired man.

I said, “Excuse me, I want a job.”

He looked at me and said, “Oh, oh. You are going to get a job.”

Oh yeah. Eventually they hired me. I had my degree. I went through something.

Where I worked they did not really have Blacks. They wanted most of us [Blacks] to pin the clothes and cook - behind the scenes stuff. But to be in front of people was a no-no. I was one of the very few who was placed in front of the public. I remember there was a Black man across the street from where I used to work.

He said, “You know you are a token Black? You do realize that don’t you?”

I said, “Look around. There are not many of us here in the beautiful dresses. I need to be here.”
I ended up working at the historic Post Office where they made the books and the printing press. I saw all these White folks going around doing all this stuff, setting up interviews and exhibits.

I said to myself, “Lord I like this. I wonder what I have to do to do that.”

So I started talking to the White people and asked, “I want to do that. How can I do what you do?”

They responded, “You need a degree in Museum studies.”

I said, “Really, how do I get that?”

After realizing I needed to return to school, I went and registered at a local college and took some classes in museum studies. I said to myself, “This is not bad”—the class experience that is. Unfortunately, I ran into a lot of racism at that school. Plus, I did not have any money. What was I going to do? I had no money.

I put my car up for collateral to get some money. And I do not know how I did this, but found another university, a HBCU. I filled out the application and took it in. Shortly after, I got a call from the Dean.

“What you want to come to my school?”

I said, “Yes I do, but I do not have any money.”

She said, “I did not ask you that. I said do you want to come to my school?”

I said, “Yes I do!”

She said, “I am going to send you some forms. Fill them out, send them to me, and you will get your money. You will get everything you need and a stipend as well.

Everything was paid for! That was God! So I went. Yes indeed. And I got a stipend too. I even worked on the side, stayed up all night doing papers. You know the drill. I worked two or
three different jobs too. I worked at the tourist site and I waited tables at a couple different restaurants. I was making money to make sure I could keep my car going.

I graduated and was in the museum field for a number of years, but because of many personal issues, I left the field and became a teacher.

**My Education Ain’t Done**

I started teaching 5th grade at a Catholic school. Shortly after, I worked at various places until I finally accepted a position in a public school and taught there for eight or nine years. Now I am teaching at a Christian school. I love it!

Throughout the years, my experiences as a teacher has led me back to college. I want to open a school, so that meant college again. I had a plan, but returning to school happened during a hard time in my life. I was going through some deep stuff. Although the grades were good, I just could not take it. I was commuting into the city all the time for school and Daddy was in the hospital. I had to be there for him. I needed to be closer to home. My parents were always there for me, so I had to be there for them. I ended up leaving, but later obtained my MBA from a private online university that had a satellite office in my area. Even then, during my last year in my business program, I broke my ankle. I had rehab and all that stuff. I was trying to get back on my feet. My brother would come and pick me up, put me in the wheel chair and take me to class. I rode up in my wheel chair until my last day. My classmates made sure I got home. I had spent my money. It was God helping me through.

I am now working on my doctorate at an online Christian university. My dad and God were the reasons I decided to take this final step in my educational career. I was on line researching schools and I started calling around. A representative called me back and we started
talking. I quickly found myself enrolled. I have been in the program for about four months now. I have a long way to go. I have a lot to learn, but even now, I am learning so much. I really am.

It is difficult studying online. My actual school location is half way across the country. I like to talk to people. I like to see people’s faces and eyeballs. I could have stayed at the school I was at for my MBA, but that was not God’s plan. It is not easy. I am up by 4:00 a.m. each morning. I have to get online, pull my messages or post assignments, and be in my classroom by 6:15 to teach the kids. When I get home, I get straight to work. If I wait too long, I am too tired. I download all the chapters and the questions that are due. You know the drill. I am up until 2:00 a.m. doing papers and what not--research and finding stuff.

I also have problems writing under the APA Style guidelines. I went online to see if my school had a special class. I even called the library to ask, but they did not. I need something to teach me how to use it. That is what I need. That little blue book is horrible. I read it. I really do read the thing. And my professor, his comments about APA or lack thereof; oh my Lord. I just say, “Thank you Jesus Christ, I got an A.” One of my professors said that he was going to start taking off points because the class was not writing in the correct APA format. I am reading this thing [the APA manual] and it looks like Greek to me.

I read other’s work, different articles, but you cannot compare. They may be wrong. I am trying to get a degree and they are doing the wrong thing. They need to have an APA class for dummies. Every grad student should be required to take the class too. Even the comments from the professors do not mean anything if you still doing the same thing. I need professors to go over it in depth and let me know what I am doing wrong. One professor took off for one paper because I did not have something italicized. He took off for that?
This is why I need to see and talk to people. I like that. My colleague suggested that I transfer to an online university that is a little more established nationally because they have small groups in your region where you meet others, chit-chat, and piggy-back off one another. My school recognizes that online education can be a challenge. For this reason, they have asked students to travel across the country this summer to meet their peers. And I am like, “I don’t have a couple thousand dollars for a plane and all that.” Where will the money come from? I am waiting on God because I have no money. I am broke.

I thank Jesus. He is the only reason I am getting through this. Even right now, I am so tired, but I need to start thinking about my essay. This is why I can take more than one class and keep my sanity. My classes are every 8 weeks with no break, except the last three weeks of the year. It will be this way for the next three years.

**My Spirituality**

I had to wait until Daddy died to go back to school. That was the price I had to pay. I took care of my folks for ten years. It was a joy. They were a joy. My parents were raised in the church—both sides of the family. They worked in the church. When we were kids, you better had gotten up for Sunday school and church. My mother, Lord Jesus, she said to me as a young thang, “If you can stay up all night watching those movies, on Sunday morning you can get up and go to church! Let us get up. Let us get dressed. Let us get moving!” Oh yes she did. CBS use to show old movies late at night. I loved old movies from the thirties and forties, but I was at church on Sunday. That was my foundation, their strong beliefs made mine unwavering.

When I think about my spirituality, I believe it is God speaking through me, my spirit. I also associate my spirituality with Christianity. Based on religious practice, we are supposed to show the way to other people. And that spirit should be in you. God should be in your life 24/7. I
cannot live without Him. There is no way I would survive. There are too many demons out there trying to attack you. But everything that God gives you, you have to use it for His glory—even my car—thank you Jesus. I was driving down the street a couple of years ago, playing my Christian music with the windows lowered. This woman flags me down and says, “Where you get that from?” I just love that. That is what it is all about. We are supposed to show people that it is a good thing. It is a good thing to go to church and praise Him.

I have been to the alter on many days to ask Him to deal with the crap. That is how I get through. A couple of Sundays ago a friend of mine invited me to Bible study. As a rule, I know I should always go to study. I was raised that way. But I had not been going. So she called another great friend of mine. She is an elderly woman that I respect dearly. Bless her heart. She called me and said, “You need to come.” So I went. This young man came up to me after prayer.

He said, “I have a word for you from God. God told me at that it is not going to be easy.”

I said well, “How do you know it is not going to be easy?”

He said, “God suffered, so you have to suffer too.”

A lot of people do not understand that. He [Jesus] suffered and we have to suffer too. We must show others the way. We have to. Understanding this has made me stronger. Lord, have mercy. Thank you, Jesus. It has made me a stronger. I think my belief in God gives me the strength to get up and do my thang every day.

Keep God in the Classroom

I think that God led me to this university. It is supposed to be a Christian school but I have my doubts. I believe in talking about God 24/7 and when you go online and you answer the questions and what not… 22 essays but no one wants to talk about God. I said, Oh, am I at the wrong school?” I said, “Oh Lord, I know you led me here for a purpose?” So I am going to talk
about God regardless and give my viewpoint from a Godly perspective. And I noticed as I wrote, people started talking about God.

What we read in class is garbage too. But we have to get through it. Our articles do not make any sense. I am reading all this stuff about leadership and the only one I like is servant leadership. That is from God’s perspective. All the others are coming from a worldly prospective. When I read my peers and professionals work, it is nothing there. They are so convoluted. People should write from their perspective and back it up. Speak your beliefs and what you think truthfully. That is what I believe in doing. They cannot be afraid. This is a Christian university. They have to look at their background, how they were raised, and their culture. Speak. All of that has effect on how you think.

God should be in everything. God should be in everything and in all you think and say. He should be in it somewhere. Like the minister said, “If you do not have any code of ethics”… I guess. Lord, I think people are afraid. You should not be afraid of God. He should be first. When you have to sit in front of that computer, ask God, “Lord what do I write?” I want to write something that is meaningful. You should not waste God’s time. You cannot waste His time. Life is too precious.

I read one of the teacher’s comments and he was said, “There is no code of ethics.”

I thought, “Your Bible is your code of ethics.”

What are people thinking? People are just too worldly. But God showed me what He wants me to do. God had told me. I was talking to Him about things and He said, “Put me in the center. Put me in the center and everything you want will come.”

I put God in it regardless of what they have to say. In most classes, we are talking about ethics, codes, and laws of the world. A person can have the laws of the world, but if the heart
does not change, there is nothing you can do. The Bible is the code for your life and if you know you are doing something wrong, why are you going to do it? If the heart is not right, how can you sleep at night? People have no heart, no faith in God.

What is also disheartening is that this semester several of my peers are not here. They have failed. I am thinking, “What is this?” They gave up the fight. I am not giving up the fight. First of all, I am too old. I want to finish. I am getting out of this program with a degree. I am. I have worked too hard already. I have my little gray cells to show.

All whom I had come to know, they are gone. They didn’t make it. I feel sad because I am in for the long haul. And sometimes, regardless of how demanding it is, you have to get stuff in, on time, and do not make excuses. Do not make excuses once you start. Stay home during the weekends and try to have a little outlet. Go to bed when you can. I know I am not married or have any children, but my life is busy too. Just last Saturday, I could not get up so I stayed in bed until at least 10:00 AM. I then got up and did what I had to do. Take your vitamins.

I feel so sad. They gave up. And it is funny in retrospect. During the first week of the program, the school had us read an article in our first class informing us of the fact that the majority of the people who do start, quit. They give up the dream. This is my dream. It is part of the plan. I want Dr. Mary. Yes, I do. God already showed me my school. He did. It is coming and this process is part of it.

I could not be doing what I am doing without God in my life. Trust me I would not be in school, working every day, and up at all hours of the night. I would be relaxing right now in front of the tube—YouTube. I love YouTube. It has all the old movies and shows. I like Hulu too.

However, I need to go home daily, get a nice hot bath, and start reading all that stuff so I can do something positive. Do not give up the dream. Do not give it up. I guess you may say that
I am driven. But, I cannot do this without Him. I assure you. When I finish, my parents will be in heaven rejoicing and I will be proud of myself because God brought me through it and I stuck to the plan. I tell you, it was Him, not me.

Finding Peace

I told you that my Dad had to die for me to be able to move forward with my life. And after mommy past I was really…I was supposed to meet a friend at church one day and she did not show. The Lord told me to just go ahead and go to the grocery store since I had a few things to get. So I went, grabbed what I needed and was in line waiting to pay. There was a woman standing behind me and we got to talking. After the cashier rang me up, I told the woman to have a blessed day.

She said, “Wait a minute, I want to talk to you.”

Long story short, she said, “I know you said have a blessed day. I heard you, but I can feel your pain.”

I walked over to her car and her husband was behind the wheel. He was a well-known pastor. Now, I may never ever meet that man again, but we talked; and you know that feeling you have like you are getting ready to fall apart. I was sobbing.

He said, “I know you are in pain and I am going to pray for you right now. You will feel pain, but not like you are feeling now.”

Honey, he prayed over me and he was right. It helped a lot. I still do feel the pain. I miss my parents. But not like that; not like I had been. Since then, my parents have come to me in a dream. I was sleep and my mother and father worked hard. They owned a home and I told my mamma that I was going to take care of it. I am the oldest, so it falls on me. I am doing the best I can with God’s grace. I dreamt that I was a walking inside the house and I walked into mamma’s
bedroom and her back was to me. She was getting dressed. My daddy had his back to me but turned around. My dad did not play. He was a very reserved person. Like me, he said few things and meant what he said. He had on this big puffy orange pane hat. He would never wear anything like that in life. He wore this orange jacket. I said, “Oh my word?” Daddy turned around and had his arms open wide and says that it was alright. My parents were alright and together, everything would be okay.

All the experience I have had has brought me to this point in my life. As my brother said, “Do not give up your dream and do not let anybody take it from you.” My brother has been my biggest support. He will call and just say, “How are things? Been online? I pray for you.” Every day he does because people are cruel. They are jealous or they do not understand what you are going through or why you going through it. This is me. For a long time, I never like me. I was so different. But I like me now.

Loving God, liking what I do, and what my parents have taught me made me love me. It has given me the strength to succeed in school. It makes for a better me intellectually too. I think. I am always thinking and I realize what others are not thinking. They are not Godly in how they live their life and the choices that they make. You cannot figure out why they do what they do.

I know people do not understand me. They do not. But we are supposed to be the salt of the earth, different. And people say, “Oh you are different. What makes you different?”

And I say I do not know, “What do you mean, what do you mean I am different?”

One day a colleague was asking for help. I helped her and she gave me a beautiful cross and said, “You know why I gave you that cross; because you give me hope.” That is what we are supposed to do. We are supposed to show the world that it is okay to be a Christian, to love our Lord, and to live for Him. It is not going to be easy. I am a work in progress, as we all are.
The Vision

I have not finished anything. I am just beginning. I am looking for a design for a better Christian School so I can start it. I can see it. Kids have no sense of God. It is the strangest thing. I was sitting in my classroom with all my students and somebody started talking about drinking. Everybody chimed in. I said, “Excuse me, what is this talk? I don’t drink. Never have. What are you talking about drinking and you just in the second and third grade?” That is how children live. They need to know there is a better side.

God promised me everything to start my school. All I need, He will give me. But the price was that daddy had to go home. That was the price I had to pay and he told me I would have anything I wanted. I had to let my parents go and be with God. I am a child of the most High God. I can see the end of the tunnel. I know I am going to make it. There have been a lot of blood, sweat, and tears. I am looking forward to seeing it. I want to let people see that they can do it. If I can do it, you can do it. You just have to have that drive. It is not easy. Like that man who spoke to me said. It will not be easy. God suffered. He suffered to save us. We need to do what we need to do. It will not last always. Just speak and live God.

Louise

Louise is a 56-year-old, mother of four and grandmother of seven. Having worked for the United States government for several years, Louise suddenly found herself in a classroom due to a life-altering accident on the job. By the time I learned of her story, Louise had completed her program. However, over a series of conversations, Louise’s speaks in depth about her life and educational journey.
My Education

I come from a fairly small family and town. I am the oldest of three children and the only girl. I got pregnant at the age of sixteen and was married at seventeen. I did not graduate from high school. That was my educational background--total.

I have believed in God all my life. I remember when I was sixteen talking to God and asking, “Why am I here? What is my purpose?”

I heard him saying, “There is a purpose. You have a purpose for being here.”

I remember responding, “Okay God, I am going to wait on you and see what this purpose is.”

At the time, I did not know the path that my life was going to take or where it would end, but, I do remember asking.

I ended up divorcing and moved to the northern part of the state. I initially started working at a warehouse. I would pull in orders, pack them up in boxes and prepped them for shipping. When there was down time, I balanced the company’s accounts. I did not know what I was doing at the time. In fact, I did not know it was accounting until I attended the University.

I got the job because of my name. It was a joke in the office. Whenever the employees were overwhelmed with work, they would say, “give it to Louise, she can do it,” but there was no Louise. However, I applied to the company and kept calling the manager trying to follow up. He thought it was a joke from his employees when they would tell him that Louise was on the phone. When he realized that I was real, he hired me.

While working at the warehouse, I applied for a government job. In order to test for the agency, I had to have a GED (General Education Development). I did not know back then, but
God had his hand on me. I had signed up for three different GED courses back at home. Each time I had to drop out. This time I needed to see it through.

I went to the local community center where they were giving the GED classes, and when I got to there, I got a big surprise.

I walked to the desk and said, “I want to register for the GED class.”

And the lady said, “If you pay $15, you can come and take the test tomorrow.”

I said, “For real? What time is the test?”

She told me the time.

I said, “Well, how long is it? I have to go to work.”

The lady at the desk provided me with the details and I paid the money. The next day I took the test. I did not finish the test because I was going to be late for work, but I passed it! I had been trying to get my GED forever. I did not know that I had the knowledge to pass it. That was God! It had to be Him. It was awesome! I got hired at the agency and worked my job for twenty-two years.

**My Relationship with God**

Over the years things happened. I got to the point where I realized that I was not in control over what was going on in my life. That was hard for me to accept. I thought I was in charge and that nothing could stop me or block me. I always said, “I got this, I can handle it. I can handle anything.” That was my attitude.

I went to a small community church and did not learn much. I just knew I believed in God. A friend and I were talking one day about my relationship with God. It got me to thinking. There was so much I did not know. Shortly after, someone gave me the New Testament and I read it. I wanted more so I bought a Bible, the King James Version. It was paperback. If you
could see the condition of it now, you would say, “Oh my goodness.” Pages are falling out and everything. I did not read the Old Testament initially. I reread the New Testament and read all the time. I would read before work, on my lunch break, and after work. I just could not get enough. To me, it was like reading a kindergarten book. Most people say that they do not understand the King James Version. I believe that God was just speaking to me--page after page after page after page. It was so exciting.

I would cry, not tears of sadness, but tears of joy. God just filled me! I would laugh. God has a really funny sense of humor. I finally began to see that things that happened, it was okay. I would then talk to God and just say, “Okay God, I surrender.” It took a long time for me to surrender to God. To let Him be in charge and to seek Him in what I do.

I was one of those people that had to be in control. I thought I was taking care of everything, but in actuality, I was not. At one point on my job, I had been mistreated and it was a very difficult time for me. There were days I could leave my house and did not even remember what path I took to get to work. I would finally snap out of my daze and almost be at the job. I could not even remember driving through the streets. I know now, those were times that God carried me.

Once I began to build my relationship with God, He would show me things, enlighten me. It made me want to be closer and closer to Him.

I can remember a time reading his Word and saying, “God it is no way I can do this. I cannot do all those things that Your Word is asking me to do.”

And He just spoke right into my spirit and said, “Because you trying to do it. You have to let Me do it for you.”
You know, I did. I let go, and let God—so I thought. I constantly struggled with trying to be in charge and do everything myself. God kept telling me that if I turned things over to Him, he would take care of me. I finally received the message and now, here I am. God is such a huge part of my life. I was searching and looking constantly for peace when I was younger. All the mistakes kept me weary. God filled the void once I sought Him and developed a relationship with Him. Now, I am full. I am a whole and complete person because of my relationship with God.

My spirituality is based on my belief in God. He is what I cannot see or touch, but I believe He is there and real in my life. It is all about, I would say, “your faith.” You have to have faith to believe in something that you cannot see and you cannot touch.

I also do not associate religion with spirituality. To me religion is a bunch of different rules or rituals. The protocol, I guess. People have different church backgrounds and traditions, so to me it is not spirituality, but more like a guideline. Christianity however is, in my understanding, knowing and believing in Jesus Christ. This is part of my spiritual nourishment. I believe in the Word, the Bible. There are several religions that do not believe that Jesus Christ was the Son of God, but through Christianity, I have come to know God.

It is nothing that He does not know. All God wants a person to do is acknowledge that He is real and that He can handle anything and everything. It is so very simple. Who else could do it? He is the creator of everything. He is just awesome.

A Life Changed

Life happened and I found myself a mother of four. Through the years, I wanted to go school. I had the desire to take classes and go to college. But, I really had no idea what college was even about. It was never presented to me coming up, not in my family. My aunt and uncle
went to college, but I never knew their profession. As time went on, I just gave up. I believed it was not going to happen, not in my lifetime. All of a sudden, I got the opportunity to attend.

I was sent home August 2009. I had been injured on the job and they no longer had any work that I could do. I left my job of 22 years with no sick leave, no annual leave and no pay. I remember driving down the highway saying, “God I do not know why this is happening, but I know you got my back.” I remember saying those exact same words to Him because that is how I talk to Him. I talk to God. My spirit talks to God. Just as I talk to people, I talk to Him and I am straight up with Him. I knew He had my back, so it started from there.

I went home and tried to find an attorney to help me obtain worker’s compensation. The guy wanted $1500 cash to do the paperwork for me. That was not going to happen. So, I got online and did all the research and completed the paperwork. I read every document I could get my hands on. I even read the manual that the head supervisors used explaining all the rules and regulations of the agency. I read the union book from cover-to-cover. I found everything that I needed. I put all my documentation in order and mailed it into worker’s compensation. I did not hear back from the office. Remember, I am not getting paid, so my mortgage was not getting paid. I spent sleepless nights wondering how I was going to get by. I just prayed and said, “God, you got this.”

I understood. I had to do the work and I had done the work. Every “i” was dotted, and every “t” was crossed. I still did not hear from the office. They never returned my phone calls. I even went up the chain of command. I do not back off, I just follow protocol. There is always a protocol, so I followed the steps and begin sending emails. I still received no response. I then turned to the internet believing that there was someone that could help me. I landed at the State Senator’s website. The website advertised that if you were having problems with government
forms, their office could help. That was the mission statement basically. I read it again and said, “Okay, sounds like me.”

I took all my documentations, made copies, and wrote a handwritten letter to the Senator:

My name is Louise. I worked for the U.S. government and was injured on the job. I am having problems filling out my paperwork. Can you help me?

I attached all my documentation and sent it certified mail. Within a week, an assigned case worker called me from workers compensation to inform me that my paperwork had been approved.

That incident was something else. Maybe God wants me to hang out a shingle and do consulting for people who need to get government forms completed. Be assured that I know how to fill them out. I know what they ask for and now know how to get things done. There is a protocol for every bit of it. You just have to follow their rules and regulations. It is unfortunate though how your stuff will sit on someone’s desk until somebody comes to shake things up. What is the saying, “stir the pot”?

I have no idea what the Senator’s office did, but I did get a response and they had asked permission to look into my records. However, I had already received a call from the case worker. Regardless, I think having a Senator call was enough to get the ball rolling.

After six months of being on workers compensation, my pay changed from biweekly to monthly. That was a big change for because I had to budget very differently and I was not getting what I earned when I worked. I had to adjust everything down.

My case worker informed me of a rehabilitative program to help people get back into the work force. Everyone does not know about this program, but I had a wonderful and extremely nice case worker. I was given a choice if I wanted to go back to school in order to train for
another career. I accepted the challenge. I had an option to go to school or not go to school. I chose to go to school and get my education. The program covered the financial piece, every dime--books, classes, labs, and whatever else was needed.

**The School Experience**

I attended a private, for-profit, university that specialized in working with adults and job placement after graduation. It was extremely diverse, particularly at the branch I attended. I was the first student at the university to be a part of the rehabilitative program. I was the pilot student.

I had to be evaluated to determine what classes to choose during registration. I did great in everything except Math. I tested on a fifth-grade level in Math. I was initially concerned, but decided to take the challenge any way. I was going to go for it and I did. My youngest daughter and her children lived with me. My granddaughter was 10-years-old at the time. She tutored me in Math because she knew more than I did. She would ask, “You need help grandmamma?” She drilled me constantly and would develop math problems for me to complete. She got me through.

I majored in Business Administration. I really enjoyed the university. I interviewed other schools before making a final selection because it was important to me to feel comfortable based on what I experienced while working. I came from a work environment where I did not always feel accepted or if others had my best interest at heart. Like I said, I had been mistreated.

The university Dean, staff, and professors were very friendly and extremely helpful. The young lady that signed me up even introduced me to my classes and gave me a campus tour. The rehabilitative program required me to take classes on campus. I chose night classes because I thought it would be better to be around others who were closer to my age. I was wrong. The evening classes were mostly older adult students that worked daily and were only about self. They were into their own thing. Typically they came to class directly from work, tired, or simply
there to get the assignment or turn one in. The majority of the time, the evening students did not show up for class. We had some students only come the first day to pick up their syllabus and only return to present. The professors were okay with that and assisted them when needed.

I switched over to day classes and most students were fresh out of high school, yet very friendly and respectful. They had a true desire to get an education and were not there to goof off. They were seeking opportunity and wanted to get their lives together, start a career. The young people were just different and a joy to be around. I also got to talk to them about God and that was a good thing.

They were also very helpful. I had no computer background or anything going into college. I knew nothing about operating a computer. I could not type, had never been exposed to a Word document, nor did I know how to write an essay. I had never written a paper before. I learned everything during my first quarter of school.

Over time my writing improved and I was doing very well. I remember however, this one Black professor whom I had completed a written assignment for told me that in no uncertain terms, it was impossible that I could have written a paper I submitted for her class. She expressed that I should not have known the vocabulary used in the paper. She accused me of copying and pasting the entire paper and demanded that I go back and redo the paper in my own words. I had to go back and use a thesaurus to bring the vocabulary down to a grade level that she thought was appropriate. I did it because I wanted an “A”.

I understood where she was coming from, so I did not get too pissed off about it. I did not disrespect her and I did what she asked me to do. I truly did not think she knew she was being so offensive. My spirit calmed me and I received my A.
My classes were all very interesting. Before I entered the university I had no idea what to expect. I had a friend help me map out my classes so I could not feel overwhelmed with my course load. It was to also guarantee that I would complete the classes in an orderly fashion and meet the coursework requirements for the program.

Mapping out my classes ended up being very important. The rehabilitative program required that you obtain your degree within two years. My degree program was 16 months. I had no time to miss a class and wait until it was offered again. Towards the end, I needed to take two classes in order to graduate. Neither was being offered during the upcoming quarter. I made an appointment with the Dean to discuss my options.

I explained to the Dean my situation and stated in a very polite manner that I was the pilot student for the rehabilitative program. It was imperative that I complete the program successfully. The program helped generate revenue for the university and could increase if I did well. The Dean granted my two classes. One of my classes was just me and the professor. I was impressed. The Dean placed a professor in class for that quarter so I could graduate. I used the tactics that I had learned from my business courses; after all, it was my major. Also, I was an “A” student. I had been recognized for my achievements, so the Dean made sure my needs were met. That was God.

My entire experience was something I was grateful for. It was awesome. I learned so much. One of my favorite subjects was science. I was fascinated by how the human body functioned, the way our bodies work. I am into natural and herbal healing. Seeing how our bodies work just made me want to know more about things that God has already put in place for our bodies.
I also enjoyed the computer classes. Web design was wonderful. I had no idea how that worked. It was just fascinating - the whole experience was just tremendous. Most importantly, I talked to young people all the time about school and how important it is. Maybe that is how He wanted to use me? Just to talk to other people about it. I do not know. We will see what happens.

**Each Night I Prayed**

My spirituality was a huge factor while in school. The work was difficult, very very hard. I would have to tell myself, “Louise, God did not give you this opportunity if He was not going to give you what you needed to get through.” I had to do the work. God gave me the opportunity, but I had to do the work. He would not have placed me in that position if He did not think I was able to get the assignments done; understanding that made me work harder. There were several times that I stayed up all night with no sleep. When I had an issue that I could not figure out, I prayed about it.

I can remember having assignments from my professors and I did not have a clue what to do. Many nights I would talk to God and pray, “God, I got to get some sleep. I am turning this over to you so please help me. Give me an answer or show me the direction to go.” He and I would talk until I fell asleep. I would wake up! He would wake me up—two o’clock in the morning. Whatever the issue was with my assignment would be resolved. I would have the answer fresh in my mind. God gave me exactly what I needed to finish what I had to do for class. He would just fix everything. Until I prayed, my thoughts would be jumbled and each time He woke me, the answer would be clear.

I prayed about the challenges that I experienced in class and asked God for guidance on how to respond. My business law class was a huge obstacle for me. The language used for the field made me feel as if I was in a foreign language class and the professor was not a
professional teacher, but an attorney. It was difficult to work with her. She was also much younger than me and that too made a big difference. She had an attitude and I had to constantly reminding myself that I was a student and I was there to learn. The professor continuously gave us wrong information. I tried asking the correct questions so I could get a good understanding of the material. Consciously I tried not to step on her toes. I wanted to be tactful and not rude so I prayed about it. My spirituality helped me respond in a different light.

It is something about being a Christian and having a relationship with God that makes you see things differently. You bring a light into dark situations. My humanities class had a lot of dark situations. We read the declaration of independence, one of the original drafts. It was very different than the one we have in our history books. It showed a lot of prejudice and the way things started out in the United States. My humanities class brought out a lot topics dealing with prejudice. I had to rely on my spirituality.

I wrote a paper in my humanities class about growing up in my home town. Back then, families were asked to go to the White school a year before they integrated the schools in my county. I was one of the volunteers. There were five African American students that integrated into the White schools before all grade levels transitioned. The first year, the test year, everything was fine. The following year went well also, buy by the third year, after they integrated the schools, the African American boys started dating the White girls in my county. The White guys did not like it. One of my classmates was beaten and left for dead. They actually castrated him. Another student, he was a year older than me, was beaten and left for dead too. There was a third guy who was left in jail and they actually killed him. Nothing was done about this.
When I wrote about these issues for humanities class, my professor read it. I guess he had compassion for the situations and felt bad.

He said, “I know people. Is there anything you would like for me to do? We can go back, research, and try to seek some kind of justice.”

I responded, “No, it is okay, I do not need to go back and revisit the past.”

Without my relationship with God, I probably would have been angry, upset or holding a grudge. Yet because of my relationship with God, I do not see seek revenge for anything. God says He takes care of everything so whatever injustice has been done; God is going to take care of it in the end. That is what I believe and it is no need for me to be upset, hurt, or wanting to fight back. That is the way I see it.

My spirituality had a lot to do with how I reacted on things in school and life. It strengthened me. It definitely strengthened me. I have been able to handle things that would normally wipe somebody out. If I have not called on God and sought Him out, situations would have just wiped me out. I would have been one of those people to blank out and not come back. However, I know that God is real and He does not put anything on you that you cannot handle. God equips you. Sometimes it is a process and you are building up to it. But when that time comes, you look back on things you went through and you know that doing that time, He was preparing you to deal with things. Yes, my spirituality has definitely strengthened me.

**How He will Use Me**

I did not go to school for my own benefit. No, no. There is no way. God opened a door for me. I do not know how He is going to use me, or what job He is going to give me. I know it is going to be something where I can support myself. I have always been a go getter, an achiever.
I barely or rarely let anything stop me. If I run into a wall, I find another direction to go forward. I have always been that way.

First and foremost, I would like to find a job. Right now, I find that kind of difficult and I do not know exactly what God has for me. I know He would not have given me the degree if it was not meant for me to use it for whatever his purpose. Yet, with the current economy, it is difficult to find a job. I also have an Associate’s degree and since I do not have years of experience, I would need a Bachelors or Master’s degree for a good salary. Fortunately, I am not materialistic. The money does not matter, but I would like to have and keep a place to live and be able to afford the basics needs in life.

I am very very happy now. Most things do not really matter to me much, but I truly believe that I want to give back. I want to work. I want to put into my country. If I do not work, I cannot pay taxes. If I do not pay taxes, I cannot support my country. This country is supported by middle class America. The high class rich people get out of paying taxes and the poor people cannot because they are not working. I am middle class America and I want to do my share. This is very important to me. The income I receive from workers compensation is tax free. Someone’s taxes are paying my income.

I am in school again—Divinity school. If I can go forever, I would. I got to share my story with children and adults--from grade school and all the way up. I shared it every chance I got. The impact that I made on the university, the young people; I shared myself, a light that God put into me to pass to them. Each and every one of those students knew that I was a Christian and I believed in God. They would ask me for prayer. This journey was not just for me. I am not being called to be a minister or preach form the pulpit, but God has something in store.
I do not however have any desire to go forward to get a Bachelor’s degree or Master’s degree in any other field. It would be helpful in the job market, but I do not want to go forward with that. I do not know really. I do not have that excitement or desire to do it. Maybe that might change one day. It may be where I am in my life. Gaining plaques and letters before, middle, and at the end of my name really does not matter to me. I just do not feel that way, but it is not because I do not think I could do it. I know I could do it. God has already shown me. You just have to put forth the work. If I was twenty years younger, I would go for a degree in Accounting. I did find out that I have an interest in accounting. It is just fascinating to me. Even I entered school at a fifth grade Math level. Accounting however, is not Math as we know it. It is not finite, so I probably would have majored in it.

Regardless, I do know God has a purpose for me and the education He has allowed me to receive. I know He had a role. He was all over it. It had to be Him. I was sent home from my job of 22 years with no income. To have an opportunity to get an education that is completely paid for; that in itself is a blessing. You know how many people had student loans? I do not owe a dime. It was completely paid for. I have a degree. I did the work. It was hard work, but worth it. I learned so much, so much.

I feel awesome. He is awesome. I went through a lot of things in my life. As I said, I was in a dark place for some time. I had been so depressed. I was on medication. I had been harassed at my job and God carried me through it all. He allowed things to happen in order for me to be able tell my story. I feel honored. Nobody, but God could do such marvelous things.

**Taylor**

Taylor is a 62-year-old mother of two and grandmother of five. She recently completed her Master’s certificate in Special Ed Severe, a program to assist children with unique learning
requirements of that have profound disabilities. Her testimony discusses several experiences in which she has relied and acknowledged that her spirituality has been the unprecedented basis to her personal success.

**Herstory**

I waited three-and-a-half-years before attending a university. I had no intentions in going to college. I came out of high school in the late 1960s. At that time everyone was going to the city to work. We lived about 36 miles from the city and you could catch the train. Most young people either got hired at the steel mill or went to the city to seek employment. I took the city route and found out that the money was so little that it was hardly worth my time. There were 12 hour days with minimum pay. I applied to the mill because my father was a foreman. I was hired I think, in 1970. I worked maybe 11 months and they laid me off. They called me back and then laid me off again. During that time I would get unemployment so I worked at a department store. The store cut my time to 4 hours per week. It was just enough to keep me employed for seasonal work. However, they typically had already hired for holidays like Christmas and Easter. I found that too was not beneficial.

I had been laid off twice at the mill, which was a really good job. I decided that that I needed to let all of that go and make myself more marketable. Every Black child, every Black female child, was going to school to be a teacher. So my family looked to me, the third of four children. I would be the one that would be the college graduate and school teacher. Since I was constantly being laid off, I decided, “Why not, go to school.” I had better potential of staying employed if I was a college graduate. Every city in the US needs school teachers. I had no desire nor did I research any other career. I just went into education without hesitation.
I started school in January, 1972. I attended one of the local branches of a Big Ten university. I majored in elementary education. Even then, I worked. I always worked. When I started school, I was working at Fish & Chips. It was a branch off of Kentucky Fried Chicken. I then took a test to work for a government agency and was hired in April 1973. I worked full-time while attending school, got married, and had a child all before graduation.

Over the years, I had gone back to school through the years and earned six hours to renew my teaching license. However, it was not until 2008, after I retired, that I returned to school full-time. I initially went to gain an additional six hours because my license had expired again. After retirement, I entered the workforce as an elementary special needs teacher. At that time, the school corporation told me that if I wanted to become a special needs teacher, I would have to return to school and to get certified in special education. I was also informed that becoming certified to teach special needs students would be the best alternative due to the low number of teachers in the field. I reentered the academic world as a graduate student. I attended for three years. I received a Master’s certificate at the age of 60 for Special Education Severe in 2011.

Since graduation, I have taken a course to ensure I have enough hours to maintain my teacher’s license. The course was oceanography, which I knew very little. I was so assertive in making it known that I wanted to take the class that the professor made sure I got registered. Shortly after, I realized that I might not need the three hours but was too embarrassed to drop the course. I received an “A”—my gracious God.

A Child of God

I have always believed that there was nothing that I could not achieve because I was a child of God. My belief in God, I really think that I was born this way. I do not think that it comes from neither family nor friends. I think that it comes from believing from within to know
whose you are. I can remember as a young girl when I was baptized--you know I am old school so they pull everybody on the front pew and the preacher preaches to you, “Fire and damnation or glory and heaven”? I was never moved by that because I knew that when God wanted me to join his family, my heart would be moved. On May 5, 1963, I was on that bench. My sister and all of her friends wanted to go to the show, but the spirit moved in me and I knew that was the Sunday. I was going to be baptized. They all tried to talk me out of it because they thought they were not going to be able to go to the movies if I did not go. I was the younger sister. They wanted me to wait for another Sunday. I told them, “Naw, it was this Sunday.” That was the Sunday God said he wanted me. I just knew.

My spirituality did not come from my parents. In my household, we did not go to church as a family. My sister and I went to one church, my brother went to another, and my parents and youngest sister attended a third church. My baby sister eventually attended a fourth church when she got older. It was not my parents teaching me the Word; it was the God within me. I have always known I belonged to him.

**Rooted in the Spirit**

I believe spirituality is that which we cannot see but a force that works for or against us. I think that good spirits are of God and bad spirits are of Satan. I believe as the Bible says that we do not fight with humans. That everything is spiritual. There is the good and the bad. When I say, “I am of God,” that is in the spirit. It is not in this body. The body is just dirt and bones. It is going to return to where it came from. The part of me that belongs to God, which is the spirit, it is going to move on home.

When you talk about religion, religion is just—I cannot say the church, because God is the church—but religion is just traditions customs. Half of them do not even make any sense to
me. I do not think that we need to wear White because it is first Sunday or that we need an usher board. I believe that people in church should do what the Word tells us to do. I think the only reason we are here on Earth is to bring souls to Christ and build the family for the final battle. That is it. All the other pompous stuff such as the annual church day, Pastor’s anniversary, church anniversary, or the women of the board; you cannot get me to join one of those groups just to wear white suits and sit up front on Sunday. I only joined the usher board only because I think I need to serve in the church, but do we really need an usher board? No. What we need is people in the streets, praising God and bringing people into the church. All that other stuff is just stuff, so no, religion is in the sense of the traditions and the customs. I do not think it has anything to do with the Bible.

To know in the Bible, it says to be Christ-like. It is to know through the Word how Christ acted and model yourself as he [Jesus] did. However, comparing spirituality to Christianity I think is like apples and oranges. Christianity is to be Christ-like. To be spiritual is to live outside of this body and live holy. This is Christ-like, but beyond the body, the flesh. It is beyond the everyday things we do. Jesus lived every day and helped others. Yet, when you live spiritually, you are communicating with God, you are conversing with Him and it does not necessarily mean helping other people. It is building your bond with the Father Almighty.

**My Education and Spirituality**

My spirituality and belief in God got me through school—all of it. I went to college in the 1970s and 1980s. I always talk about academic school, but I worked for 34 years and 11 months. I probably took over 100 courses of various trainings that we were required and that we had to pass. When you are young, you do not know that the Lord is keeping you. You may even be arrogant enough, and I probably was, to think that you were doing it on your own. As I grew
older, I learned more about God, my Savior, and I knew that nothing was from me. Sometimes you just have to stand still. I believe that.

As an undergraduate, I had a professor in speech who was determined that only one Black person was going to get an “A” out of the class. At that time I was the person. Another young Black lady was in my class. She had a full load. She had taken three reading courses in one semester. Eventually she did have a breakdown. She was always wired. I can see how hurt she was when I was the student the professor chose to give the A. The young lady was trying so hard. She was an excellent student. There were many of us who did very well in that class and more than one Black person should have gotten an A. I could remember thinking at that time how prejudice the system was even though it worked in my favor. However, I just believe that the breakdown came because the young lady was putting more faith in her and in people than she was in God. For me, when thing started to happen in school, I just always went down on my knees. Always.

It was the same in one of my reading methods classes. That was the course that trained the educator how to teach literacy. I think I was just married. You know barely making it. I think my father was even paying my tuition. I was working, but between the working, being married, and parenting; school was just school. I would just go to school. One of my professor’s had given us an assignment. It was a White professor, Caucasian. He marched around the room maybe about 30 minutes telling everybody how Talyn was the only one that had passed his test. At the beginning of the semester, he had already told us that we would not have a chance to make up any grades. As he started passing the papers out, after 30 minutes of praising Talyn, he froze when he got to my paper. See, our names were similar. It was my paper. I did well on the test. He looked at the name and then looked at me. He handed me my paper and never opened his
mouth to correct giving praise to the wrong person. In fact, he gave the entire class the
opportunity to do another assignment, which negated mine because it was not an “A”. I had
gotten a “B. He was going to throw out the previous grade for the class and offered it to me to.
He had to offer it to me, but why would I want to make up a B? He gave the class the another
chance, without penalty, to do another assignment. I just marked it off to Black and White.

On the last day of class, I decided to just put on some clothes, make-up, and comb my
hair. When I walked into the classroom, the professor had the audacity to say that if I had looked
like that all semester it would have been different. And I looked at him and asked, “What
difference did it make?”

A recent teacher acted similar. In my graduate studies, my focus was on special needs
students. The concept is to treat all people fairly, remembering that those who have special needs
and disabilities are also people with feelings. The professor first ranted and raved all the time
about her thesis paper. That was the basis of the whole class. Rather than getting a text book for
us to read, we had to read her paper she wrote. So, I thought, “Okay, I will give it a shot.” All
semester long, she had a group of about ten people—there were about twenty in the class—that
she directed all of her instruction and teaching. Why did she do it? They had accompanied her
the semester before down to South America for a relief program. She felt as if they were her
comrades. She was prejudice against the rest of the class. The group of ten students did not have
the same requirements or standards as the remainder of the class.

There was only one Black guy in particular—I am a Black lady—in the class that
summer. All summer long the professor talked about him, but out of his presence. I thought it
was very unprofessional. I really was tempted to tell the head of the department. The only reason
I did not was because he had told me that he was dropping out of the program. I figured why hurt
people; not meaning him, but why hurt her? The professor seemed to have had some problems in her life prior with losing a teaching position in the public school system. I just let it go.

I am not sure that it was the God in me that let it go, or maybe it was. You are not really supposed to stir up stuff and start problems. I am working on me with that too because sometimes I have to watch my tongue. I just did not feel like it was the right thing to cause any body any harm. Even though I did not like what she did, I did not want to make trouble for her. Thinking about it, it was the God in me who said, “Do not speak on it.” You are not knowingly supposed to hurt people and put obstacles in their way. I like to think that I do not do that and I did not want to do it with her.

Because I am Black and female, over the years, I have learned to accept and deal with peoples’ ways. Sometimes if I did not see myself not only as a spiritual person, but also as a Christian, my response to situations may not have gone well because other races tend to look down upon on us. Many times, other races believe that they have all the knowledge and everything they say is right and that is not necessarily. Sometimes you would get those professors who would not even acknowledge your comments. I have learned to be tolerant and I guess what I do is give it to God. That is important too. I have learned that if I stand still, just stand still, and trust God, He is going to remove all giants from my path. Many times going through school my spirituality helped keep a positive attitude, even when people want to ridicule and put you down. I knew I was going to be victorious because of God. I just waited on Him to move. I did it over and over and over again.

I just think through my entire educational experience God had my back. I can truly say that, especially when it came to my writing. I did not have the necessary writing skills needed for school. When I read my documents, did I think it is on a college level? No way. My first
graduate paper my son-in-law had to fix up for me. Many times during my academic career, I did not have that extensive vocabulary to write those types of papers that would be classified as exceptional writing. Yet, God has always allowed me to pass those classes. He has always put somebody in my life to mentor and assist me. I know that to be true. When I read other people’s work, and then I read my own, I can see the deficiency. Those grading the paper had always given me the benefit of the doubt and I was always able to be successful. My achievement did not come from me. I know it comes from God. My God is going to pull it out for me. That why I praise him.

To complete my graduate program and be able to maintain my license, I had to take a praxis tests for elementary education. I took one in 2010 and 2011. I studied, but I had been out of school—formal education-- since 1975. I will always say that God said, “MOVE OVER, I GOT THIS.” The praxis was not a test where I felt that I knew all the answers. All the young students around me were finished in an hour. It was a two hour test. I think I completed mine ten or fifteen minutes before the test was over. I did pass, but that was God.

I think being strong in my spirituality and having a relationship with God has strengthened me over the years. I cannot do anything. I do not care whether it is education, life, I do not care. Whatever it is, whatever challenge, I have, I need, God. I need God not just for the challenges, but my everyday life. Now I do not know that I learned that through school, but I think I learned that from just knowing God. I did not learn that from just going to church because all preachers do not know the Bible. I want to be clear about that. They do not. A person learns through reading. You got to read his Word and then you have to ask him for understanding. It is also better that you learn in a group, I think. I did not. A person should continuously seek wisdom, continuously profess that you are his, and praise him. Those things I learned as I grew
older. I always knew I was his, do not get me wrong. I always knew. I just had a feeling that He was my Father. However, as I grew older, I learned that I could depend on him and that made the difference.

**School Again?**

I said after the oceanography class, that it would be my last formal class. I however, also work for a tax company and we must go to school every year, receive 24 hours of training, and take a test comparable to the praxis. I remember when I was young. You have to watch what comes out of your mouth, but you do not know that until you know God’s Word. I made a statement, “I can go to school all of my life. I just want to go to school.” Well now I am saying Lord, “I don’t think so.”

I have come to a point in time where--and then technology has changed. When I started it was just pencil, book, and paper. When I went back to school in 2008 everything was technology. Now students have to go online and find the answers. There was no more feeding us information and we regurgitate it. Professors now say, “Here is the idea and the concept, research it. What is it that you think? Prove or disprove if it is right or wrong.” In other words, educators are making students responsible for their own education. Teachers do the same for the young students now. I am not saying it is a bad thing, but it is a pretty hard thing. At my age, which is 60+, I would hesitate to go back to school.

Even as I say this, the professor for my last class came and asked if I wanted to take another course. They even shared that they had all the material already and prepared. I just stared blankly saying quietly, “Who sent you to ask me this?” I just took the class announcement and told him I would think about it, but no, I do not have the desire. I laugh though because that
[having no desire] has ever stopped me before. God is good. What can I say? Whatever He says, all I ask is that He just give me the desire to do it. If it pleases him, then I am okay.

**Beyond Self**

What happens to me—you see I am always looking at the big picture. My education is not just going to benefit me. It will benefit the people around me. I always want to be able—I am talking about the workplace now—to be active in the workplace if I choose to do so. I always want to be able to help people, especially my children and my family if they need. I have two adult children and five grandchildren. One of my children is an associate pastor. I knew that too. I knew when he was a little boy that he was going to work for the Lord. I think he has bigger things planned for him.

Sometimes, a person is more interested in the everyday workings of life and sometimes they get you down. What I did early--hopefully early enough because they were not infants—was tell the Lord, “They belong to you. You gave them to me for me to raise, but I am giving them back to you because you have got to be in their life more so than me.” I always prayed that I live long enough to raise them, but I wanted God to be with them and in them their entire life, so I gave them back to him.

I also truly believe that a person should do something for somebody outside of your family. My husband, whom I have been with for over 45 years, always tells me, “If you stop giving away so much money, we would have some money.” How much money do you really need? One should always bear in mind that we live together here on this earth. If someone else is doing poorly and you are able to give them a hand up, then you should. It is what Christians do. I don’t need five pair of shoes if you do not have any. Four would do me just fine. I should look to help those who need help.
My final words to others are to be aware as they try to get through life. A person can be fooled if they do not know their Bible, the Word. I am not saying that I know my Bible entirely, but I know some of my Bible. I do not want to be misled. I have got to know that I know. If not, I might not be doing the wrong thing, yet I have to live Christ like and bring others to God.

I saw someone with a Buddha in the yard the other day. I like to assume that everybody is a Christian, so I said to myself, “That is a false god and has no place in her yard or house it only has a place in the garbage can.” I would like to share with those who hear my testimony, there is only one God that we serve, and it is not Buddha.

LaShanta

My Childhood

I was born and raised in a rough city up north, southeast of a major metropolitan area. I was the oldest of two and spent many days with my sibling playing in a very happy household. My parents were loving, kind, and extremely fair people. They worked hard and tried to do the best they could, even during the times when we financially did not have. We lived in the “better” part of the city, as my friends would say. I just like to think of it as a very family oriented, working class part of town. Although we were removed from much of the negativity of the city, somehow it still touched and influenced how we lived. I know my environment helped me develop what many would call “street smarts” and the ability to survive just about anything. In any case, I loved growing up there.

I had a great childhood. My neighborhood was full of kids. During the summers, we typically were already out to play by 9 a.m. and did not return home until the street lights came on, which was around 8:30 p.m. We grew up Catholic. My mom had married my dad who was raised Catholic, so as a tradition of the church, the children would be raised under those beliefs.
Although my mom attended church, she never converted. She identified herself as a Baptist, and, as adults, both my brother and I became Baptist.

I was fortunate enough to attend parochial school my entire life, attending the same elementary school as my father once did. I believe that I was blessed to be exposed to the best teachers and resources in spite of growing up in a city that was infested with poverty, drugs, and high crime. As children, our lives were consumed with many things beyond the classroom. Even being somewhat removed from inner city drama, I still attended more funerals of friends—children—than others could in a lifetime. I could never reflect on my educational journey without including memories of my childhood. School was just a part of life, being a child. Everyone knew it was cool to be in school. I do however, remember that I struggled with comprehension and reading quite a bit. The issue manifested in college. That was probably the extent I remember about being in the classroom.

The Post-Secondary Experience

I attended a Big Ten university and found that my worst subject was English. I remember my mother suggesting that I go and get tested for dyslexia after she watched an episode of The Cosby Show (Guarnieri, 1989) that highlighted the character Theo’s learning disability. In my freshmen year of college, I learned that I was classified with a mild case of dyslexia, and at the time I had the reading comprehension level of an eighth-grader.

With academic help from campus resources, I began to work past my obstacle and within four years, I graduated. Throughout my undergraduate years, I had worked with several college students, both traditional and adults learners. I typically carried two jobs in order to help reduce the cost for my parents. They were determined to pay for my school so I would not have student loans. I worked in the school cafeteria for several years and during the end of my sophomore
year, I was fortunate to be selected as a Resident Advisor. This experience introduced me to the field of Student Affairs in Higher Education. My senior year, I decided to apply for graduate school and was accepted into an Adult Education program. Attending my graduate program was a true eye-opener.

When I entered grad school, I was 21-years-old. My mind and my thinking were that of a young, inexperienced adult who was energetic and naïve about life. My peers in my graduate program were quite the opposite. They were so much older. They were husbands, wives, parents, and individuals with established careers. I had no idea what I was walking in to. In fact, the very first day of class, I walked out thinking I was in the wrong room. My professor had to run the hall and bring me back. He laughed and said, “Welcome to our world.”

I guess it was rare to have such a young graduate student express an interest in adult learning. At the time I entered graduate school adult learning programs were beginning to strongly emerge. I always knew I was an educator, but the K-12 environment, was not appropriate for my personality. I had a profound interest in working with and training adults. I had come to that realization as an undergraduate student. Yet, I was an outsider in this new environment. I remember the feeling of not belonging. It was difficult for my peers to relate to me and me to them. Developmentally, we were in two different stages in our lives and I struggled academically. Grasping concepts and having the basic understanding of what we would discuss in class was difficult. The program was beyond the traditional classroom and basic text books. The research was in-depth and it was imperative that students were able to critically analyze what was being taught and be able to connect the dots with life experiences and literature. It frustrated my peers, yet, it intrigued me.
I can remember my research methodology group wanted to remove me from our qualitative research project. I remember I cried to my mother about this situation. I was the only Black female in the group and the rest were White women. I felt they treated me as if I were beneath them. It was also my first encounter with qualitative research and I had a lot to learn. I fought during every class to make sure I was respected and that my opinion was valued. The incident just taught me to work hard and always stay five steps ahead.

Because of the geographical location of my school, many students in my program were Black female adult learners. I wanted to know more about these women. I was strongly interested in how they survived the challenges and how or if they ever escaped that burning feeling I carried in my heart of not feeling as if I belonged. At first, I felt that way because I was so young, but even at a campus that had a strong representation of Black students, I always felt like the “fly in the buttermilk” (Davis, Dias-Bowie, Greenberg, Klukken, Pollio, Thomas, & Thompson, 2004). With that intense feeling, I just wanted to graduate quickly, so I never got an opportunity to ask the Black women in my program how they were getting over (Johnson-Bailey, 1994, 1998).

My Spirit-filled Soul

I always knew that I was a believer. Spirituality in my mind means to have unconditional faith and a relationship with God. I think spirituality is beyond the physical. It is not of this earthly world. Our flesh, the human mind, cannot completely understand or grasp the power of God. God works beyond my understanding, yet because of the relationship I have developed, and continue to build with him, the experiences that I have had has empowered me to discuss how he has strengthened me. I trust God. I use the Bible, God’s Word, to guide me.
There have been so many things throughout my life, even as a young child, that continuously brings about a yearning desire to get to know and understand God better. I have always known that God, the Spirit, lives within me. My parents raised me in the church. I attended a Catholic church until I was 19-years-old. I was extremely active in church missionary groups and even led the teen group for two years. Although I was raised Catholic, I attended a Methodist church in college and became Baptist at age 23. I never associated my religion with my spirituality. I attend church because the Word, the Bible, reminds us that it is important to fellowship and center ourselves with like-minded people (Philippians 2:2, New International Version,).

I also study the Bible often. The Word brings me closer to God. I am able to learn and to gear my life to walk in His image. I have taken several classes in theological studies. They help me as I grow in my spirit. My spirituality has evolved and become so much more than the foundation provided by my parents. I always felt in my spirit that God favored me and that I would continue to build an everlasting relationship with Him. I have always felt his love and care in my heart. God wants to use me. He has used me to bring others closer to Him. Yet, I believe that there is also a greater purpose, a bigger mission.

I had a woman walk up to me when I was 22-years-old. She looked me straight in the eye and said to me, “God has a plan for you.” At the age of 28, I was coming out of a church service and a gentleman approached me, prayed over me, and simply said, “God has a mission for you, you are a chosen one.” I have not been surprised by the words of others. Many have complimented me on having a great heart and good spirit. While I thank them for their words, I know it is not me. For some reason, God anointed me. He has placed a hand on my life and I continuously hold on knowing that I called to carry out his Word. I know God is in me. I have
been told since I was a young girl that I have his spirit that moves within my soul. I never claimed to be perfect, but I do agree that I can feel the intensity of God’s presence within my life. Spirituality for me is having a connection with God that has manifested over the years. My spirituality leads me into a realm that allows clear communication with an unseen entity in which I believe is omnipotent and powerful. The power is passed on to me because of my faith.

I recognize that the spiritual bond is not just mine. My relationship has and has had great effects on those whom I love and people whom I have met over time. Because I understand that there is a purpose greater than I can imagine, I stay strong. My spiritual mentality is what has helped me survive my academic experience.

**First Year Doctorate Student**

I had completed my graduate program within a year, and was fortunate enough to get hired at a Research 1 Institution in the Midwest. My very first week, my supervisor and I met to discuss job expectations. As we conversed, I saw on the sheet I was holding that one of the expectations was “professional development.” And what was written under this area? “Go back to school for an advanced degree.” I could have screamed. Did I really want to pursue a doctorate degree? I was so happy to be done with graduate school because of the intense pressure and always feeling as if I were a day late and a dollar short of success.

After much deliberation, a few weeks later, I was enrolled in two classes. The voices of my elders still rang loudly in my head, “Get your education.” By winter quarter, I had applied for a doctoral program and started that following fall. School was rigid. I was working full time running a residence hall of undergraduate students and attending classes every night. I carried 15 credit hours. Life was non-stop.
As I reflect on the process, I understand that the experiences I have had throughout my academic career were designed so that I could share my testimony. The journey has indeed tested my spirituality, my faith, and my endurance. God truly had his hand in everything and carried me through. I am a survivor and witness to how he has made a very trying and complicated path become one of the most meaningful and life altering situations for me.

I started my PhD program at the age of 23. I remember my application process. It was questionable if I were going to be accepted. My Master’s transcripts were fine, but my undergraduate grades were fair. I remember interviewing for the program which was my saving grace. God gave me the gift to speak. I am a presenter. I can express, candidly, honestly, and with inspiration. I thank him daily for allowing me to be able to communicate in such a way that my words capture the heart of people. I know my interview was the key that opened the door for my future.

My education was also free. It was initially a benefit because I was an employee to the university. All I needed to do was pay the taxes. I laugh at times, because the taxes were typically a substantial lump of my paychecks. I applied for additional funding and received a grant. I was then able to attend with minor financial worry. I believe God had his hand it that too.

As I shared, I carried a full load of coursework while working. In fact, I have always worked throughout school. I have had a job since I was 15-years-old. As an undergraduate I had two jobs, and at one point three. In my Master’s program, I was a Graduate Hall Director and I taught two classes a semester. When I started my Ph.D. program, I was a Residence Coordinator and had a paraprofessional staff of twelve. The residence hall was full of young women that kept me busy with life and student development.
Classes for me would typically go from 4:00 p.m. to 6:00 p.m. After class, I would quickly eat a packed meal and move into my next class that was from 7:00 p.m. to 9:00 p.m. When class was over, I would go home. During my first year, home was an apartment within the residence hall, meaning that I was on my job 24/7. Being young, I was energetic, career driven and definitely a workaholic. Although I transitioned to another career in my field the following school year, I still worked all the time and attended school in the meantime. As time passed, I also became heavily involved in the community. I was greatly consumed with responsibilities.

Overall, I did well in school. However, I have always believed that there were two major factors that had a profound effect on my lack of academic success; being overextended and more importantly, my academic writing. As a first year student, I thought I could handle the responsibility so I kept pressing. However, non-stop commitments ungraciously affected my life and academic progress. As I look back on it, I think God was allowing me to live in such a matter to teach me, train me, and strengthen me. Many times I focused on too many things which produced mediocre work in my opinion. I was not truly excelling. Like several young people, I was overloaded. I was trying to be everything to everyone and as a result, I was ignoring the success of one important individual—me.

What was more heart wrenching was my academic writing. Back then, as a first year student, and even in recent years, there have been several incidents regarding my work that made me lose confidence and the commitment to continue. There have been very personal and discouraging moments. Some instances I can share openly. Others, I have only shared with God. The pain and embarrassment was too much to bear.

I assume because of my early years of struggling with comprehension that writing became a difficult component throughout my entire educational career. I am honestly not sure.
The truth however is that I have always written, but writing for the academy is quite different. I questioned so many times during my first year of school, and even now, “Why on earth am I a doctorate student?”

There were several occasions that I received feedback and seriously debated if I would walk away from the program. One of those days was after I received the following comments neatly written on one of my assignments:

*On A Day That I Cried*

*LaShanta,*

*I like you, I respect you. I admire you. I think you will do well overall. But I will have to give you a ‘B’ for this course. I would have loved to have given you an “A”, but I needed an “A” paper and unfortunately that is not what you delivered. Your thoughts were scattered and not well presented. I also spent a great deal of time editing your paper. I would do you an injustice if I would tell you that your work was well written. It was not. Please come by to speak with me if you have any questions.*

*Best Regards,*

*A Truthful Professor*

In the world that I live in, writing is very creative and extremely poetic. I have been writing poems, musical lyrics, and motivational speeches since I was a tween. Writing is an eclectic art to me. In the same regard, I am, and was, a professional writer in the workplace. I have always prepared written correspondence on the job. Yet, it has always bothered me as to why writing for the academy has been challenging. I also read constantly. I knew during my first year and even now, I needed to study and analyze others academic writing. To this day, I am always in awe with scholars’ eloquent, yet academic way of presenting data. I even studied the
writing of my peers and always ask in my head, “How do they write so well?” What is it that I am missing? More so, why did God tell me to “keep pushing?”

**Meningitis**

Within my second year of studies, I became very ill. It seemed that I had literally worn my body down and had caught viral meningitis. At the time, I was so sick that I had lost my vision, my ability to walk, and the pressure on my brain was inexplicable. I was just blessed that it was viral meningitis and not bacterial meningitis. If the diagnosis was different, I would not be here to tell this story.

Having meningitis changed me. I was very fortunate to have my significant other, parents, family, and friends who encouraged me to fulfill my dreams. I was always told that I could not only reach for the stars, but grab hold of them. In essence, that was true. I was blessed beyond measure. I do not think that I missed anything in life. I had an open door always. Even when I thought an opportunity was missed or my heart was broken, life had a way of just working out for the good. I always knew that God was watching over me.

I was 24-years-old when my life changed. I was doing extremely well on my job, in graduate school, in love, and even with minor struggles financially, I was looking at a very nice future. I had even been out of the country and was traveling every opportunity I had either for work or pleasure. I was active in the community and at this point, making strong waves to move to the next phase of my degree program. Life was good. What I understand now, was that life was also heavy.

All of a sudden, in 45 minutes, my entire life was brought to a halt. I can remember being in the office when my legs simply stopped holding. Literally, I could no longer stand. There was
no explanation for it. There was no rhyme or reason. I had fallen. In my mind, I did not question why it was happening, but what I pondered was what I could do to get back up, gain control.

I was doing too much. I was concentrating on the unimportant things and not remembering to keep it simple. In any event in my life, it needed to be perfect, accurate, planned. In fact, back then, several of my friends insinuated that I was a perfectionist. There had to be order, so God spoke. For three weeks, He moved me to a place mentally, reminding me that He was over all things. He was the gentle whisper that quietly showed me that it was His Will that should be done, not mine. God tested my faith. He tested my spirit.

I remember my doctor coming in the hospital room one morning—7:00 a.m. There was no family around. I was in the critical ward, so visitations were limited. The doctor walked in and simply said, “You are dying, anyone tell you yet?” It had been almost a week before I even knew the diagnosis. My condition was rare. By the time I was admitted into the hospital, I had already visited the emergency room twice. I was averaging a fever of 103, no longer walking, my head was exploding—so it felt—and my vision was limited. I actually lost vision shortly after being admitted. I also had lesions on my body. To this day that still has not been explained.

When my mother walked in, she asked, “How are you doing”?

My parents traveled down to check on me when I abruptly hung the phone on them expressing that I did not want to talk. The illness made me extremely irritable which was not in my nature.

Mamma asked again, “How are you doing”?

I told her, “The doctor said I was dying.”

In my mind, I was already prepared to have my parents and significant other, now spouse, help me finalize the details of my life. I was not worried about dying. Being the type of person I
was, I wanted to make sure the business was in order. I can even remember thinking, “Am I strong enough to get home and clean up my junky room before I die”?  

I was okay with what God had planned. My mother, on the other hand, in this very strong distinct voice calmed the room within seconds. She simply said, “That is a lie. You are not dying. We got a God.”  

My mother never worried. She never shed a tear. She never wavered. There were so many things that I do not remember from being ill. I was in a lot of pain and on plenty of medications, but that very moment, I will never forget. My mother reminded me that I, nor the physicians, had the final say in the outcome of my destiny. Dying was indeed not what God had planned. The incident was just a reminder that it was time to turn to God. Over the years, I was trying to carry my burdens alone. I did not turn to God and ask for guidance and direction although it was what I believed. I wanted to be superwoman and in the process I forgot to call upon Superman. I had let my relationship go with God. I had forgotten 1 Peter 5:7, “Cast all your anxiety on him because He cares for you,” (New International Version).  

Shortly after sharing the news with my family, I sent my father on a journey to hound the nurses and doctors for more information on what had been detected. My husband, then boyfriend, walked towards me and sat down. He looked at me and said, “You got to have faith. Is that not what you have claimed to be about all your life – God? Now is the time.” I had forgotten, I was so willing to just lie there, sick and willing accepting to die a life incomplete. I had forgotten to give my life to God. When I sat in the dark room, my mother now propped in the chair asleep, I let go and let God. I recovered and was home by my 25th birthday. It took a year to feel whole again, but I was alive.
PhD-One Day?

*If finishing this degree can only be real.*

*So what part of this is hard?*

*The classes? The writing? The job? The family? Or being broke?*

*I don’t know, they all seem to be equal stressors right about now.*

*Finishing? That doesn’t look like it’s going to happen.*

*This journey is difficult!*

*Am I dreaming? My head must be in the clouds.*

*But I keep pushing because my spirit tells me to.*

*Why is that?*

(Self)

I had gone through such a serious ordeal, but I realized that I still had unfinished business with school. I got sick in November. By the following January, I had reenrolled in classes. I quickly completed my coursework, took my comprehensive exams, and completed my proposal hearing. When school was all said and done six months later, I mentally had to let it go. Has anyone ever told you that you are going to die? It can change your lifestyle, how you think, and the choices you make. It definitely changed mine. Years prior, I work hard and played little. I decided that I wanted to live and not be stressed. I walked away, so I thought.

It is difficult to change. In my mind, I started something that was important to me, my family, and my community. I never stopped striving to get my degree, even after the illness. I have not been able to ignore the voice in my head, saying, “You will complete this.” It has been equally stressful carrying the burden of not having finished my degree as it was to attempt to walk away from it. I now truly believe that God has a purpose for me and my work. Over the
years, I have tried to finish but the fear of weighing my body down again, constant
disappointments regarding my writing, and circumstances in my life left little confidence and
desire. Yet and still, God keeps whispering, “Finish it.”

Time passed. Throughout the years, I would write, but I could never seem to get it right. I
met challenge after challenge to complete my dissertation proposal. Still, in each conversation,
each prayer, I would receive the message from God in my spirit to remain persistent. So I did,
but life did not stop, it evolved.

I married, relocated, and had two children all after the age of thirty. I remember my
husband walked into the house one afternoon, sat me down, looked me square in the eye, and
said, “We are moving.” I thought that we were buying a home. I had no idea that my spouse was
referring to us travelling across the country. I had conversed with my husband regarding the pros
and cons to relocating. If we moved, we would be extremely far from family and friends. We
also would be unemployed. I got on my knees. I asked God to guide our household and our lives.
We were making a bold move. I believed in my husband and I knew that because of my strong
bond with the Father God Almighty we would survive.

I left the area with no job and no degree. Through the years, I continued to work towards
my degree, but it was extremely difficult being disconnected from the department staff and my
peers. I was now on my own and trying to establish a life in a very foreign environment. Within
a few months, I was working and commuting over three hours a day. By the following year, I
was pregnant. Three years later, I was pregnant again. Life had taken a turn and had dealt me a
new hand. How exactly would I play?

It was not until after giving birth to my last child did I begin to be more aggressive about
completing my degree. Receiving the degree was never just for me; it had always been for my
family, my community so I could position myself to give back and have a better life. More importantly now, being in school is for my children. One day I was having a conversation with my daughter. She had been concerned on why I had been so busy. I could no longer be as heavily involved with my community efforts and my children’s activities and some of their basic care. I needed to depend on their father to carry some of the load. I had to explain:

“Mommy needs to finish school so I can help make a better life for you and your brother. I want to set an example that you both can achieve anything you put your mind to with prayer and diligence.”

My daughter is very young. She looked at me as if I were speaking a foreign language so I had to put this in terms that she could understand.

I simply said, “I am working hard because I love you.”

She replied. “Oh mommy, you are doing this because you love me?”

I laughed and said, “Yes. I am.”

Over the years, God and I have had some very emotional and humbling conversations about earning my PhD. I had to pray. I had to seek God and discuss how this was going to work? How would I complete a degree living in one of the busiest and expensive metropolitan areas in the country? How could I survive sitting at a computer most nights after working very long full days, cooking, cleaning, bathing children, completing homework, and acting as a personal taxi for soccer, birthday parties, rehearsals or doing whatever else was needed. I am also a wife and I believe it is so important to maintain a healthy relationship with my spouse. I am exhausted. I sleep four hours per night, sometimes six hours on a good day. This is crazy!

Both of my children have become my life. They too are a testimony on why my relationship with God is so strong. When I was pregnant with both children I was told that they
would be born with medical challenges. In fact, the doctors said that my son would need surgery immediately after birth. Both children were born early, but perfectly healthy. When my son was a little over a year however, he was hospitalized with a severe illness that kept the doctors scratching their heads about the outcome. They had an idea of what was occurring, but thanks to the God I serve, all of my son’s tests were negative and eventually, he healed. I remembered my mother’s response when I was ill. I immediately depended on my steadfast faith in God and prayed non-stop for my child’s recovery. Ironically, I repeated the words of that my mother said more than ten years prior, “That is a lie. We got a God.” Yes indeed, life dealt me a new hand. I look up now and I am the adult learner that I was so eager to research. I know that it is only through the God’s grace that I survive.

I have watched so many of my peers complete this journey—earning their PhD. and I always ask, “God which day will be my day?” What is it that I have to sacrifice to complete this goal? I am 38-years-of-age now and spiritually, I believe that I needed to live through this experience to write it, complete the work. It was meant for me to share two very special components of my life, 1) studying about the experiences of Black female adult learners and 2) God.

I have been weary. When I think about length of time to degree and the stumbling blocks particularly with my writing and my other responsibilities, I know that it is my spiritual strength that has pushed me forward. God has kept me in good academic standing all these years. The evidence is present. I am still here, a doctoral candidate. I thank Him and praise Him every day for keeping the door open to success. Each time I think about how the opportunity should be closed, could have been taken away, I just praise Him. God has always softened a heart, promoted understanding, and placed believers in my path to get it done. I give honor to God. I continued to do the work, and He continued to carry me through the fight.
Music and Poetry

I write all the time. As I have been immersed in completing research and preparing the final paper, I kept a journal to capture the process. Music and poetry have been significant throughout my academic journey to relieve stress, find peace, and meditate on God. Here I share four pieces that exemplified my feelings (My Heart), my thoughts (Burden Heavy), my experience as a parent (Mamma, Mamma), and my source to continue (I Believe).

My Heart

Broken.

Feeling a day late and a dollar short.

Strong.

I know I can do it.

Pumping.

I have to cross the finish line.

Bleeding.

Sacrifice I must.

Burden Heavy

Can I meet you on Sunday?

Not available until next Saturday.

Is 10 p.m. too late?

Ha, Ha, Ha.

No, I will just be pulling in my driveway.

Did I get a response yet?
Can I afford to pay for that?

Damn. Is it over?

No, it is just beginning.

*Mamma, Mamma*

I love you.

As she smiles at me and calls my name...Mamma

I hurt myself.

As he holds his knee up for a kiss and calls my name…Mamma.

Did you cook?

Are you finished with your meeting?

My homework, can you help?

I am learning to read.

Is it time for a bath?

And a story too?

Mamma PLEASE, can I sleep with you?

Now it is late at night.

Working hard.

2 a.m.?

Oh My God.

He cries.

She had a bad dream.

Mamma, Mamma!
House is quiet.
Morning gleams.

*I Believe*
I like to clap my hands.
I like to stomp my feet.
I believe in you Lord.
You’ve got the victory.
In the time of trouble.
When the enemy is trying to weigh me down.
I focus on you Lord.
And peace I have found.
Because, I, I, I, I, I…
I BELIEVE.

*True Soldier*

*But I'm still alive*

*Still looking for the light*

*And the endless pool on the other side*

*It's the wild wild west*

*I'm doing my best*

*I am a soldier of love*

*I’m at the borderline of my faith*

*I’m at the hinterland of my devotion.*
I’m in the front line of this battle of mine.

(Adu, 2009)

Sade sings the words to a beautiful song titled Soldier of Love. When the song was released on the radio I embraced the lyrics. The words described my being, my moment as I reflected on life, school, and my tomorrow. I had to be a soldier. I needed to continue to love myself and be confident in everything that was in place and my future. The years have brought along broken promises, financial strain, failure, illness, and stressful lifestyle, and definitely worry. However, my spirituality grew through it all, yet, there were times when I questioned God. I asked often “Why me? What is it that you have me to do?”

January 25, 2006

I am getting ready to start a new life. I am leaving everything I know. I am scared. I am excited. I am torn. For so long I was established in this life. What I have right now. And my husband, he is so brave. He knows we can have more, achieve more. My mom tells me not to lose myself. I am not sure what that means. But I am on my way. I say good-bye tomorrow.

I remember when my mother spoke to me right before I moved from the Midwest. She was very happy that I was branching out, yet again, and trying to make a better life with my husband. But her words never left me. She said, “Don’t lose you.” I remember telling her that I would not. After all, at that time I felt fabulous about life. I was 30, still somewhat a newlywed, winning awards, doing well in my career. Things were great.

But then, as years moved on, I began to see what she meant. I was becoming complacent, bogged down with multiple responsibilities that yielded very little to my benefit. I became lost in routine, forgetting the personal goals that I had so longed for in my past. When I look at my
educational career, I know that God has made it possible because the everyday burdens could have, and should have, made me give up years ago. Yet, I am a soldier. I needed to continue to love myself and be confident in everything that was in place and my future.

I too have learned that I must be organized. I must prioritize and stay committed to the mission. Living a lifestyle where everything is rushed and ongoing, I have come to realize that my health, my family, and my mind have been greatly affected. I have learned to omit unimportant things, and remember that this (school) too shall pass.

I decided to adopt a healthy way of living because obesity met me at the front door. The intensity of the stress and multiple responsibilities has made food my comfort. My mood also is unacceptable. My reaction to my children at times and people in general uttered the words of “frustration” and “anxiety.” When I am honest with myself, I at some point know that there is a need for change. Fighting for this degree brought challenges, but it has been the transformation that made the challenges worth battling. I am a soldier in God’s army. I have placed on the armor of God. Ephesians 6:10 – 15 reads:

10 Finally, be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power. 11 Put on the full armor of God, so that you can take your stand against the devil’s schemes. 12 For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms. 13 Therefore put on the full armor of God, so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground, and after you have done everything, to stand. 14 Stand firm then, with the belt of truth buckled around your waist, with the breastplate of righteousness in place, 15 and with your feet fitted with the readiness that comes from the gospel of peace. 16 In addition to all this, take up the shield of faith, with which you can
extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one. 17 Take the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God (New International Version).

I am not sure what God has planned. I do know that the outcome consists of all that I have learned and researched throughout the years. School has been very important in shaping me, making me stronger, building my spirit. The journey has been long. School is an intertwined part of my life, who I am, and who I will become. It is important that I continue to fight and find closure because I hear God’s voice. He now whispers, “Ashe, it is done. Use it to glorify My name.”

**Summary**

Every person has a story. This chapter shared the testimonials of five women who conveyed how and why they were back in the classroom, what their challenges have been, and how spirituality played a role in their survival. The findings helped to compliment and frame the womanist profile of Black female adult learners. The findings also unveiled several themes that fell under the umbrella of three major categories. The themes were accumulated from the expressions of the participants, unveiling further insight of Black female adult learners. The next chapter discusses and analytically interprets the results.
CHAPTER V: DISCUSSION AND INTERPRETATION

Womanist Profile – Revisited

The theoretical framework for this dissertation was centered on Alice Walker’s Womanist theory and Patricia Hill-Collins insider within concept. Womanist theory helps profile the Black female adult learners in this study, while the insider within concept helped to liberate and validate the voice of the participants as they expressed their experiences as a student and spiritual person. The outcomes of the testimonies help to further shape and define the womanist profile for Black female adult learners.

Sasha: A Loving Womanist

Sasha’s experiences mirrors a womanist framework alluding to self-love. As a woman divorced twice, Sasha found herself asking the question, ‘What does love have to do with it?’ bell hooks (2001) wrote that love is the foundation of life and hope. For Black women, love has everything to do with it, but the most important form of love is that of oneself.

In listening to Sasha’s testimony, love has always had a strong emphasis on her life. Her story tackles love of that for men, family, and the global world in which we live. I noticed that Sasha really tested her spirituality on responding to her peers. In her very calm voice, Sasha stated that she witnesses a lack of respect that individuals provide to one another. Her response to their actions is what 1 Corinthians 13:1-13 reads, “If I speak in the tongues of men or of angels, but do not have love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal,” (New International Version).

To use love as a verb, (hooks, 2000), dared her to invest time into transforming her own personal life. Sasha, in her mid-life finally accepted the proposition and left behind her past to find a road that promoted her self-respect and self-admiration (Stukes, 2002).
Mary: A Determined Womanist

Mary’s testimony was strong. In everything she did, Mary has been determined to succeed. Mary stressed in both direct and indirect ways that she at one point in her life did not like herself which left a heavy burden on her heart. In conjunction with her low level of self-esteem and acceptance, Mary encountered challenges in her life that constantly reminded her that she was indeed Black and female. Furthermore, Mary’s dedication to her parents yielded her from pursuing her goals with total concentration and commitment. Mary never conceded however. Despite the challenges, Mary proved to be persistent and diligent in achieving her academic goals.

Mary’s experience during her undergraduate years and her first professional position encouraged Mary to continue to stay headstrong and steadfast in trying to accomplish her goals. Mary grew up in an era of racial unrest. Blacks were slowly becoming liberated to love themselves. Mary too searched for love of self. In this journey she aggressively searched within strengthening her mental health to become sound in mind and spirit (Heath, 2006). Mary understood that that her well-being would ignite the well-being of others (Banks-Wallace, 2000) that is why her establishment of a school is her ultimate dream.

Mary’s experiences created a consciousness that demanded action in order for her to progress regardless of the levels of marginality and limitations (Banks-Wallace, 2000). Heath (2006) stated that “Black women would rather die than to admit that they are unable to cope (p. 156). The determination within Mary to overcome her feelings of doubt and discomfort was transformed because she was rooted in her spiritual perspective and convinced that her education would be a sounding board for success. Mary’s womanist strategy is not uncommon. Womanist
theory settles in the strength of cultural traditions and spiritual connections (Heath, 2006; Floyd-Thomas, 2006; Witherspoon, 2008).

**Louise: A Spiritual Womanist**

The unspoken stress throughout Louise’s life stood out vividly as she shared her story. From the time of a young child to her entering college in her late fifties, Louise was exposed to and experienced situations that would have made it understandable to surrender years ago. Adisa (1990) argued that stress is intertwined and woven into the lives of Black women:

Stress is hemmed into their dresses, pressed into their hair, mixed into their perfume and painted on their fingers. Stress from deferred dreams, the dreams not voiced; stress from the broken promises, the blatant lies; stress from always being at the bottom, from never being thought beautiful, from always being taken for granted, taken advantage of; stress from being a Black woman in a White world. (1990, p. 13–14)

How can one survive when there are constant challenges or circumstances? If the issues were not in the classroom, the challenges for Louise had met her at her doorstep throughout the years. However, Louise’s spirit kept her calm. Her conversations with God were rich and daily. Louise loved the spirit (Walker, 1983).

Heath (2006) wrote that “Black women’s spirituality is the inner resource that builds meaning to help sustain her through the darkest moments of life” (p. 161). Louise stated several times that her conversations with God were the visions that gave her hope and provided understanding and eliminated the stress. Louise had become strongly rooted in her spiritual side that centered her response to life, school, and circumstance.
Taylor: A Strong Womanist

Taylor’s story represented a quiet strength. In understanding womanist theory at its core, Black women, regardless of their walks in life are able to deal with the injustice based on their response and reaction. I can remember Alice Walker (1983) spoke of her mother asking for flour and being turned away from a White woman. Her mother told how she swapped with an aunt when needed to get through the winter as she shared her corn meal. It reminded of what Walker (1983) described as the “condition and strength of a people” (p. 16). Although society has had a way of humiliating Black women, devaluing their worth, and not acknowledging their existence, Black women have quietly survived and like, Walker’s mother, have been able to hold their head up high with admiration and respect because of their silent triumphs.

Taylor’s testimony exemplified her greatness. Taylor was able to overcome struggles in the academic arena as a humble, yet wise woman. Her strength was built on years of experience and meditations with God. Taylor has been able to maintain a sense of wholeness (Williams & Wiggins, 2010) and aimed to not only progress in her academics for self, but that of family, children, and community. She indeed accomplished just that.

LaShanta: A Fighting Womanist

After reflecting on my own story, I thought about Alice Walker and how her definition of womansim profiles my life. I came to the conclusion that I am one who ‘loves struggle.’ The two words touched my soul and seemed appropriate for my testimony. In completing this research, I have spent countless hours remembering past and current circumstances regarding my academic journey. I realized that this story would not have been complete if the inclusion of my entire academic experience over the full course of my life was not mentioned. My academic journey has penetrating numerous obstacles that demanded strategies for a greater triumph.
Phillips and McCaskill’s (1995) essay both expressed how womanist ideology helped them escape feelings of hopelessness and defeat as we are constantly bound to the systematic oppressions of the world and the academy. Phillips (2006), in fact, described womanism in my interpretation as a method of healing. She argued that the duality of the worlds in which we live can hurt us, but more importantly can also empower.

As a Black female adult learner, I understand that I must continue to move forward regardless of the struggle. Alice Walker (1983) once said that she “writes to celebrate with the world that she had not committed suicide the evening before” (p. 229). In knowing her story, yes, to some extent, Walker was indeed a troubled soul. But as I look at the underlying meaning of her statement, the womanist profile of Alice Walker would not have led her to suicidal attempts, but to a method – in her case poetry – that authorizes, strengthens and motivates the will to progress and overcome.

As I associate my struggle in the academy with the words of Walker, I, at times, think that I almost gave up and was willing to allow myself to die and let go of being a student. So many times I wanted to quit but my womanish attitude allowed the FIGHT in me to continue – claiming my victory. I too, like Walker, had to find a mechanism that made me strong, confident, and motivated to continue the journey. For me, it was my spirituality – it was my God.

**Connecting Our Testimonies**

The analysis process exposed three major categories and emergent themes that were placed under the appropriate category that responded to the guided research questions; 1) What are the present motives leading Black female adult learners to higher education?; 2) What are the recent challenges for Black female adult learners in higher education?; 3) How do Black female
adult learners define spirituality?; and 4) How has spirituality influenced the academic journey of Black female adult learners?

This section interprets the findings based on an analytical style of writing (Anderson, 2006; Chang, 2008). The method permitted the researcher to include reflexivity and theoretical analysis in order to connect the narratives.

**Purpose: Our Guiding Light**

*I didn’t know how to ask for directions for my trek through the uncharted waters of purposelessness. I knew only that I was in bad mental and spiritual shape. I needed something – anything to get unstuck. I knew I needed to take a bold step – any bold step – and see what awaited me (Brazelton, 2005, p. 21).*

In 1 Corinthians 9:26, Paul wrote, “I run with purpose in every step” (New Living Translation). The first research question asked, “*What are the present motives leading Black female adult learners to higher education?*” The women of this study sought to advance their education for professional growth, employment, or advancement as suggested in past studies (Coker, 2003; Johnson-Bailey, 1994; Noble, 1956). They also found reason to attend college for empowerment, because of free education, and as an opportunity to work for the greater good in the community and with others. The findings were components of a larger picture—a complete purpose.

**Professional Opportunities**

Most of the women in this study reported that a primary reason for them returning to school was to get a better job or to enhance their skills in order to be able to obtain professional goals. They knew that making the choice to enroll in college would be of benefit:

*I have not finished anything. I am just beginning. I am looking for a design for a better
Christian School so I can start it. (Mary)

I would like to find a job. Right now, I find that kind of difficult and I do not know exactly what God has for me. I know He would not have given me the degree if it was not meant for me to use it for whatever his purpose. (Louise)

At that time, they told me that if I wanted to continue in that field, they being the Community School Corporation, then I would again need to go school. (Taylor)

Reentering school was important so I could position myself to give back and have a better life (LaShanta).

The findings are consistent with literature. In Noble’s (1956) report on Black collegiate women, she wrote that Black women were primarily in school to be trained for occupation. She argues that education was “consistent with the Negro woman's role as a working citizen. Her role as a worker is a historical heritage passed on to her from her foremothers, who have always labored - first as slaves and later as domestic workers” (p. 116). Thomas (2001) also found that the Black female adult learners go back to school for career advancement and economic growth. Miles (2009) concurred with the findings in her work. She found that black adult learners were motivated to attend college for career advancement and professional growth and family.

**Free Somehow**

The national average for college tuition is approximately nine thousand dollars per year (NCES, 2012). Adult women have an advantage to obtain financial support with the high volume of scholarships available (“Scholarship America,” 2012). Schools are also strategically recruiting students who are categorized as adult learners. With the influx of online education, institutions of higher learning are looking to build their student body. We all were recipients of a “paid for education.” Louise explained that one reason she did not believe she could go to school was
because of her financial circumstances. Yet, after being hurt on the job, a door opened up through her worker’s compensation program and she was able to receive a free education:

I said this was not going to happen to me, not in my lifetime. I am just not going to go to college....They covered the financial piece—every dime. (Louise).

In a follow up conversation, Sasha also expressed that at some point, her education was also supported through grants and company reimbursement:

I have loans. But I am also able to get up $5000 reimbursement from my job since my educational focus is work related. (Sasha)

Our testimonies represent opportunity. Thomas (2001) stated in her work that financial constraints were a huge barrier for Black female adult learners. Knowing that there are options brings hope to other Black females who want to go to school. Many Black women do not know that there are possibilities to obtain financial support for returning to school.

**Personal Edification**

From listening to Mary, Sasha and my own personal words reveal an emerging theme. School was a personal quest. It was one that could save us. We in some way were losing our identity when we are constantly trying to negotiate with society, spouses, children, parents, and even the workplace. In essence we forget our purpose. Watt (2006) explained that Black women experience moments of having low self-esteem because we allow society and circumstance to define and consume us even in the classroom. We forget our worth, our values; we become obligated to others, and we lose confidence.

Mary had spent a great deal of her years taking care of her parents. She had committed herself to them because she believed so passionately that it was her responsibility as the oldest child to tend to the needs of two individual who had loved her unconditionally as a child.
Mary also expressed that throughout her program, there were so many students that do not return. She gathered that it was because they found the road to be difficult and believed that individuals were giving up their dream too quickly. Because Mary had to delay her dream of ultimately building a school – hence having to go back to school to earn her degree – she was adamant about the fact that this indeed was HER DREAM and part of “the plan” in starting her own school. If for nothing more, one thing she did know was that she was attending school for Mary.

This is my dream. It is part of it [the plan]. I want Dr. Mary! Yes I do… My parents will be in heaven rejoicing and I will be proud of myself because God brought me through it and I stuck to the plan. (Mary)

Sasha, having been through two failed marriages realized that at some point the goals in her life had to be a reflection of who she was and what she wanted to do. She expressed that if she could stay in school forever, that would give her the freedom to explore all the wonderful things that she has had an interest in throughout her life.

I am going to school for me. Can I be a professional student [she laughs]? If I did not have the student loans, I would just always be in school. I would just be in school the rest of my life. I would have multiple degrees in all kinds of areas I am interested in. But reality- that is a whole different story. (Sasha)

I also had to remember that although I gave unconditionally to the community, family, the job, I needed to commit to completing my goals and fulfilling my dreams. Regardless of worry and fear, pressing forward was necessary.

I became lost in routine, forgetting the personal goals that I had so longed for in my past.

When I look at my educational career, I know that God has made it possible because the
everyday burdens could have, and should have, made me give up years ago. Yet, I am a soldier. I needed to continue to love myself and be confident in everything that was in place and my future. (LaShanta)

Miles (2009) reported that women attended school for cognitive interest—“acquire new knowledge, learn for the joy of it, and expand my mind” (p. 51). The participants of this study shared the same sentiment. They also acknowledged that they were in school to rise above their past or to simply see themselves and not get lost in becoming who and what society expects. The issues and challenges along made us stronger, which was a force of encouragement to reenter the classroom. Collins (1991) wrote that although we sing the blues, it is only to let the story be known that we have faced hard times, struggle, lost loves, and have experienced heartache. But as hooks (2000) shared in her writings, we must continue what is possible. I interpret her words to mean that we continue to evolve, love ourselves, and know ourselves as we grow into ourselves. The stories of the participants for this study were no different. We returned to school for “us” in order to regain our souls, complete our missions, and regain the strength that at one point may have been lost.

Thomas (2001) wrote in her findings that the women in her study also made a personal choice to return to school for self. What was significant was that Thomas (2001) also expressed that the women of her study had an increase of self-esteem and confidence after entering school. Coker (2003) supported this finding. She noted that the women in her study central reason for returning to school were for self-development (p. 662). She further reported that the women acknowledged that culturally it was extremely important to get an education, reach their goals, feel empowered, transform their lives, and have self-definition— as Collins (1986) described.
The Children

Laughing and singing in the warmth of the sun

Not a care in the world just life filled with fun

But what will become of all the children – the Children

Where will they run if the well of our love runs dry?

Will they find a place to play in the sky?

Tell me. Where will the Children go should the rain begin to fall?

The answer is yours, but the problem belongs to us all.

(Smith & Jones, 1977)

My dad wrote those lyrics when I was three-years-old. I hum the tune all the time. It reminds me of what we should be doing as mothers, teachers, and role models. What indeed would happen if our love was gone? What would happen to the future of the children?

As I was talking with Mary, the only one of us who did not have children, she still focused on them. She has dedicated her life to educating young people, and she is so dissatisfied with the lack of resources, lack of preparation, and lack of ethics and values in the lives of our children. Her strategy and focus in school is creating a design that will challenge the savage inequalities that Johnathan Kozol (1991) once wrote so emotionally about. She explained:

I am looking for a design for a better Christian School so I can start it … God already showed me my school. He did. It’s coming. It’s part of it. (Mary)

Sasha, Louise, and Taylor and I are all mothers and educators whether in our churches, workplace, or schools. We are constantly setting an example for our sons and daughters (Collins, 1991) and other youth. I asked them each were they in school just for them and so quickly, they responded, “No.” Louise spoke frequently about who she considered the “young people” at her
college. She opted to take day classes and was surrounded by traditional aged students all the time. Louise’s goal was to share her trials and tribulations using them as testimonials to uplift the young people in her classes (Floyd-Thomas, 2006). To her, they too were children still young and gullible. She believed that sharing her life experiences could help guide them and provide them with words of encourage as they navigate through their own educational and personal experiences. This is what she testified:

The impact that I made on the university, the young people; I shared myself, a light that God put into me to pass to them. (Louise)

Louise also found that she was able to empower her granddaughter. She had a very special way of reminding her granddaughter that she was smart and bright. Louise had to test when she initially started school to determine what classes she should be placed in. She tested at a very low level in Math. As she journeyed through school, her granddaughter – a 10-year-old child- became her tutor.

My granddaughter was 10 years old at the time. She tutored me in Math because she knew more than I did. She would ask, “You need help grandmamma?” She drilled me constantly and would develop math problems for me to complete. She got me through.

(Louise)

Sealey-Ruiz (2007b) conducted a study on Black female adult learners and their daughters. In her findings, she noted that one of the most important factors for Black mothers’ returning to school was to influence their daughters to attend college. Unknowingly, Louise supported this by acting as an example for her granddaughter. Collins (1986, 1991) also shared that relationships between mothers and daughters—in this case granddaughter— becomes
empowering for the child. The relationships are valued and promote self-esteem and self-definition.

Both Taylor and I believed that in everything she did was for the benefit of her children and others:

What happens to me—you see I am always looking at the big picture…. I always want to be able to help people, especially my children and my family if they need. (Taylor)

… I can help make a better life for you and your brother. I want to set an example that you both can achieve anything you put your mind to with prayer and diligence.

(LaShanta)

Coker (2001) expressed the words of Wilson (1978) that family is where children learn values, customs, and worldview of their culture (p. 75). Coker (2001) shared that several women in her study on Black female adult learners were indeed in school for their family, and particularly their children. Nine of the ten women in Coker’s (2001) study consistently articulated that their purpose for returning to school was to act as an influence on their children and placing in the minds of their children that school was important and should be attained.

**Black Community and Others**

Taylor had pointed something out in her interview that struck me. She is a giver. As she further explained that she was back in school for others, not just self, she began to laugh because her husband teased her about giving away money:

My husband always tells me, if you stop giving away so much money, we would have some money. But how much money do you really need? (Taylor)

Taylor continues this conversation and she shares what she strongly believes about giving back:
One should always bear in mind that we live together here on this earth. If someone else is doing poorly and you are able to give them a hand up, then you should. It is what Christians do. (Taylor)

Louise’s sentiments are the similar. She expressed why she believed that getting her degree was important. Louise wanted to provide financial relief to the community.

If I do not work, I cannot pay taxes. If I do not pay taxes, I cannot support my country.

(Louise)

I remember stopping for hot coffee from a local fast food restaurant one morning. As I pulled up to the drive through checkout, the cashier told me that someone had already paid for my order. Certain actions, no matter how small, remind me that we must always pay it forward. When I am up late with my eyes half open, I keep pressing. The victory belongs to not just me, but so many more.

A Womanist with Purpose

Brazelton (2005) wrote that purpose should be driven and in each step taken, the goal is to find and grasp on to the future leaving past behind. When the participants of the study decided to go back to school, it was evident that their quest had purpose. Each participant of the study fought through obstacles, multiple obligations, and inequities that in the past kept them stuck and not progressive (Brazelton, 2005; Weathers, 2006). However, just as Mary needed to grow professionally to build a school and Taylor had to help children with severe disabilities; the purpose is typically bigger than the person and more important for the good of the whole.

Purpose permits Black female adult learners to share their talent, serve others, and validate their lives (Collins, 1986; Weathers, 2006). Purpose demands that one must step out of their comfort zone and walk at times blindly into unknown territory - just as Sasha had to do in
relocating across the country and restarting her life. Purpose enables one to reflect and self-evaluate making individuals strong and confident (Weathers, 2006).

Womanism incorporates purpose, revitalizing Black female adult learners. It refocuses their lives moving them more toward “knowledge, love, meaning, hope, transcendence, connectedness and compassion” (Summit Results in Formation of Spirituality Competencies," 1995, p. 30, as cited in Williams & Wiggins, 2010).

Change: Challenges Transformed Us

Change is inevitable. Patricia Cranton’s (1994) perspective on adult transformation is a combination of both individual transformation (Mezirow, 1995) and social transformation (Tisdell, 2000). Her outlook was appropriate for the emerging theme regarding change in this study. She believed that adult learning can emancipate the illiterate, serve as an avenue to obtain new skills and acquire knowledge, address the needs of adult learners, and also involve a process of reflection and evaluation of self. These factors can lead to change – or transformation.

The initial question for this research, “What are the recent challenges for Black female adult learners in higher education?” led to testimonies illustrating how technology, online learning, time, and academic concerns have changed our lives over time.

Technology

One common theme that rose out of the testimonies was that the constant change and advancement of technology had been both a benefit and a frustrating experience. For Sasha, Mary, and me, who are somewhat younger, and a little more technically savvy, transitioning to some of the computer-based tools now used in the classroom was manageable. Taylor and Louise had different perspectives. Louise shared:

I had no computer background or anything going into college. I knew nothing about
operating a computer. I could not type, had never been exposed to a Word document…if I had a question they helped me with it. (Louise)

Louise was from a small town and had not been exposed to computers because she had never had a real need. At 56-years-of-age, there was now an intrinsic requirement for her to capture the basic skills of word processing and operating a computer. Chaffin and Harlow (2005) identified this need as “life centered,” which is considered one of the richest sources of adult learning (p. 309).

Taylor had been in and out of classes of some sort her entire working career. She had been exposed to computers and had basic knowledge and skills. What challenged Taylor was the advancement in technology:

…and then technology has changed. When I started it was just pencil, book, and paper. When I went back to school in 2008 everything was technology. Now students have to go online and find the answers. There was no more feeding us information and we regurgitate it (Taylor)

Both Louise and Taylor captured my heart when they were speaking of what they did not know about technology and how it was not only a challenging part of their education, but also an important part that promoted change in their life. Louise had not been exposed to computers at all. I noted in my observation how her facial expression was when she explained that she had no clue about operating a computer. Her expression was not of shame, but that of excitement. She was smiling as if she was remembers “then” and loving where she was “now” based on her technical ability. She was proud of her milestone and fortunate that someone had helped her overcome the obstacle.
For Taylor, being exposed to the different methods of learning through technology helped her. Chaffin and Harlow (2005) argued that exposure to technology develops and enhances critical thinking skills in older adults. The online learning tools challenged Taylor to not only enhance her technical ability, but as Taylor noted, “… how to respond via online to reaction papers, do research beyond the four walls of a library, and create presentations and improve my public speaking.”

One of my favorite classes in my doctorate program was Human Learning. I remember that part of the requirement was to study Howard Gardner’s (2003) theory of multiple intelligences. We were given a group assignment that required using the nine multiple intelligences in a lesson plan incorporating technology. I think that was the first time I understood how technology could transform thinking and academic development.

McCain (2009) wrote that technology can provide various transformations in adults based on a 2008 study conducted by the National Commission on Adult Literacy. They found many adults lack basic and workplace skills. Technology was recognized as being an important factor for offering an effective method to enhancing the necessary skill-set and needed knowledge in adults (McCain, 2009). Furthermore, McCain (2009) argued that incorporating technology into the world of an adult learner provided a few results that were beneficial to all, particularly the student: 1) Positive learner outcomes; 2) Student persistence and motivations; and 3) Willingness to do self-study knowing that there is access to the necessary needed resources, tools and materials. Furthermore, technology is has permitted adult learners to be continuously independent and competitive within the academic arena. The women of this study, although challenged, revealed in their own words that indeed technology enhanced their skills, challenged them and aided in their academic accomplishments.
Online Education

All, except Louise, at some point in our academic journey took online courses. For Sasha and Mary, their entire programs had been online. Sasha and Mary expressed why they made the choice to explicitly attend school through distance education. Mary said:

I was commuting into the city all the time for school and Daddy was in the hospital. I had to be there for him. I needed to be closer to home. (Mary)

Sasha expressed a similar reason, but she also talks about how the diversity enhances her learning.

My school is online. I could sit in a classroom, but my lifestyle is too consumed with other things. So, I choose not to. And the class is made up of people who are from all over … Georgia, Tennessee … just all over. And it is a diverse group of people. It makes learning interesting. (Sasha)

A 2010 report from Women in Higher Education notes that Black females are choosing online education more than any other method of attending school. The article stated 2500 women enrolled in the University of Phoenix that year were enrolled online. I kept this article in my collection because at the time, I was becoming more fascinated with online education. The metropolitan area in which I live is one of the leading locations for teleworking, so at my current job, we do quite a bit of online training.

I am not surprised by the statistic that Black females are moving their classroom to the virtual world. I think about my personal life and the truth is that if I had to sit in a classroom and go to school, I would not be enrolled. On average, I spend three to four hours of my day commuting to work. I have children, meetings, and basic day-to-day responsibilities that would hinder me from being able to get to a class on time, if at all.
I also think online learning helped to validate Taylor’s point. Technology has changed how we learn. There are so many opportunities to quickly increase our knowledge with a click of a mouse or touch screen. It made a difference to me. I was able to do research and still be in the presence of my children. I think that was important. In some ways, I had the best of both worlds.

I also understand that online learning can hinder our relationships and peer connections. Although Mary chose to attend school online, she expressed that it also brought about hardship and at times frustration. She explained:

It is difficult studying online. My actual school location is half way across the country. I like to talk to people. I like to see people’s faces and eyeballs (Mary)

Mary continued as she discussed meeting peers in her academic program:

My school recognizes that online education can be a challenge. For this reason, they have asked students to travel across the country this summer to meet their peers. And I am like, I don’t have a couple thousand dollars for a plane and all that. Where will the money come from? (Mary)

**Academic Discourse**

When I interviewed the women for this study, I was amazed that I was not the only one challenged with professional writing.

What was more heart wrenching was my academic writing. Back then, as a first year student, and even in recent year, there have been several incidents regarding my work that made me lose confidence and the commitment to continue. (LaShanta)

Sasha expressed the following:

I just say my little prayer and I say, ‘Okay God, enlighten me.’ Many times I struggle. I can’t find stuff. I can’t find stuff to write the paper and write it
well. (Sasha)

Taylor shared that she too was challenged by this issue:

Many times during my academic career …I don’t have that extensive vocabulary to write those types of papers where it would be classified as exceptional writing skills….I can look at my writings, and do I think it is on a college level? No way! (Taylor)

Mary also shared concerns about her academic writing. In many academic settings, the American Psychological Association (APA) style is the primary guide students’ use. Her struggle was related to the style of writing that is required for her field:

I also have problems writing under the APA Style guidelines. I went online to see if my school had a special class....I am reading this thing [the APA manual] and it looks like Greek to me…I read other’s work, different articles, but you cannot compare…They need to have an APA class for dummies. (Mary)

Recasner (2007) contended that the composition component of a classroom challenges the success of Black students. She agreed with Nieto (2002) and shared the thought that the classroom becomes a “battlefield for power struggles” (p. 596). This battle, as Recasner (2007), described can be overcome by recognizing that Black students could adapt better to writing if allowed to use their “voice, language, experiences, and world” (p. 597). She further challenged higher education to acknowledge that academic writing is a “sociohistoric gatekeeper” (p. 597). Thus, the conservative way of written communication, limits the opportunity for Black students to grow and succeed in higher education.

Academic writing requires practice and training. Recasner’s dialogue revealed the difference in Black students and challenged the academy to acknowledge “gatekeeper[s].” There has to be a balance that enables us to strengthen our written ability in order to become scholars.
One of my past professor’s, always challenged our class to “speak white male.” She promoted that we learn the language, but never lose ourselves. We must begin to be cautious and omit cultural dialect unless necessary, correct our grammar, and become critical thinkers who can express our thoughts with clarity (Recasner, 2007)

Each participant in this study wanted to be a better writer. We grasped that writing was and is vital to our success not only in higher education, but in our workplace, community, as parents, and as persons who simply want to have voice in this country.

Because of the history of what Black women have historically experienced, ironically, when we do write well, our ability is questioned. Individuals, including our own kind, fail to expect remarkable writing. Louise validated this point from an encounter she had with her Black female professor:

She expressed that I should not have known the vocabulary used in the paper. She accused me of copying and pasting the entire paper and demanded that I go back and redo the paper in my own words…I did it because I wanted an “A”. (Louise)

No Time

Storm, blow me from here

With your fiercest wind

Let me float across the sky

‘Til I can rest again.

(Angelou, 1994, p. 153)

How could I survive sitting at a computer most nights after working very long full days, cooking, cleaning, bathing children, completing homework, and acting as a personal taxi
for soccer, birthday parties, rehearsals or doing whatever else was needed? This is crazy!

(LaShanta)

The participants agreed with my sentiment:

It’s just a struggle. I don’t have enough time. (Sasha)

There is no time, but there is a plan. I am in for the long haul. And sometimes do realize how demanding it is. I am in my classroom by 6:30 a.m. and on the computer for school by 6 p.m. And I know how demanding it is being a student. It is demanding. Getting stuff in and on time and do not make excuses. Do not make excuses once you start.

(Mary)

Taylor is a grandmother of five. Three of her grandchildren live very close to her and are visiting with her four to five days during the week. She also has a second job and typically works weekends as well. As she was sharing her story, she explained that her time has been limited since her initial start of college in 1973:

I was just married, you know, barely making it, I think my father was even paying my tuition. I was working, but between the working, being married, and parenting; school was just school. (Taylor)

Black women carry heavy responsibilities in their personal lives. Parnell (2007) reported that Black women typically experience what Bost (2005) called the Hurried Woman Syndrome (HWS). Parnell (2007) examined 91 African American working mothers who identified their lives as busy and rushed and assessed their health in comparison to their lifestyle. She found that fatigue, depression, libido, and weight were the four main health concerns. Fatigue and depression were the highest leading indicators for HWS. The data revealed that on average,
Black women identified with HWS were sleeping five hours or less and experienced high levels of depression that then affected their weight and sexual desire.

Heesch and Massee (2004) reported that 50.8 % of Black women are obese as a result of multiple responsibilities and limited physical activity. Their study inquired if Black women did indeed have time for physical activity. The result showed that they did have time, but due to the feeling of exhaustion, many times Black women opted to do “sedentary activities” such as reading, watching television or journaling (p. 56).

Both studies highlighted and affirmed one important fact: for Black women, exhaustion is a reality. The women in this study are hurried women who have placed their well-being at risk. The participants also indicated that in order to overcome this challenged, there must be physical and mental strategies in place. Heesch and Massee (2004) contended Black women must replace sedentary activity with physical activity, which can revitalize their bodies and create more calm, stress free individuals. The women in this study realized that the challenges of multiple roles were present, but, understanding the harm in this lifestyle, they chose to allow transformation of their mind and body by eating well, making personal time, and exercising. They revealed:

I found that if I just keep my priorities straight then that helps me to get through the assignments and stay on top of the stuff I need to stay on top of. I eat well and exercise daily. I also try to make time for my family every weekend. (Sasha)

Go to bed when you can. I know I am not married or have any children, but my life is busy too. Just last Saturday, I could not get up so I stayed in bed until at least 10:00 AM. I then got up and did what I had to do. Take your vitamins. (Mary)

I decided to adopt a healthy way of living…When I am honest with myself, I at some point know that there is a need for change. (LaShanta)
A Changed Womanist

Womanism is about surviving and overcoming oppression and marginalization (Collins, 2000; Walker, 1983; Williams & Wiggins, 2010). It empowers Black women to overcome and find benefit to the challenges and obstacles faced from societal forces and carry a bold agenda for their lives (Brazelton, 2007; Walker, 1983). Womanism brought about transformation which liberated the Black female adult learners in this study (Phillips & McCaskill, 1995). Despite negative experiences with technology, online classrooms, writing, and lack of time, the women of this study chose to embrace the issue and find success from each.

God: All for His Glory

You made my day
You came my way
You heard me every time I pray
You gave me peace
You gave me grace
You put a smile upon my face
(Clark-Terrell, 1981)

In 1981, the Clark Sisters, a Black female Gospel group, sent shock waves across the Black community with their number one hit song, You Brought the Sunshine. The song acknowledges the joy and peace that individuals feel when they have a relationship with God. I have sung this song for the past thirty-two years. It was the year of my sixth birthday and I could remember my parents playing the album over and over as we danced and rejoiced in the living room. For me, the lyrics had always had a personal message which was a reminder that when I
stressed, was overwhelmed, confused, lost, lonely, and frustrated, that I could turn to my higher Spiritual Being - God.

The final two questions for this research asked the participants: 1) How do Black female adult learners define spirituality; and 2) How has spirituality influenced the academic journey of Black female adult learners? Similar to the testimony of the Clark Sisters, each of us referenced or acknowledged God.

Spirituality

There were two distinct factors that helped formulate a definition for spirituality: 1) spirituality is having faith in God, a spirit that is unseen and 2) being separate from religion. The women shared their words:

believing in something that is higher than me. Having faith in something that I cannot see and believing in something that I cannot put my hands on. (Sasha)

I believe it is God speaking through me, my spirit. (Mary)

My spirituality is based on my belief in God. He is what I cannot see or touch, but I believe He is there and real in my life. It is all about, I would say, “your faith.” You have to have faith to believe in something that you cannot see and you cannot touch. (Louise)

I believe spirituality is that which we cannot see but a force that works for or against us. I think that good spirits are of God and bad spirits are of Satan. I believe as the Bible says that we do not fight with humans. That everything is spiritual. There is the good and the bad. When I say, “I am of God,” that is in the spirit. It is not in this body. (Taylor)

I believe spirituality is to have unconditional faith and a relationship with God. I think spirituality is beyond the physical. It is not of this earthly world. Our flesh, the human mind, cannot completely understand or grasp the power of God. God works beyond my
understanding. (LaShanta)

Meraviglia (1999) defined spirituality as “experiences and expressions of one’s spirit in a unique and dynamic process reflecting faith in God or a supreme being; connectedness with oneself, others, nature, or God; and an integration of the dimensions of mind, body, and spirit” (p. 29). This perspective, like ours, can indicate that spirituality goes beyond any traditions or customs. It is not only the belief in the unseen, but an established relationship that creates love, hope, wisdom, understanding, and peace regardless of circumstance with oneself. 2 Corinthians 4:16-18 also supports this position.

16 Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. 17 For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. 18 So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen, since what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal (New International Version).

The second significant aspect to defining spirituality from some of our perspective was that spirituality and religion are not the same, while two saw religion and spirituality connected. Several studies articulate that religion is a part of spirituality, but it is not spirituality (Mattis, 2002; Newlin et al., 2002; Tisdell, 2007).

See, I associate my spirituality somewhat with my religious beliefs. When I think about my spirituality, it is more of my relationship with God. How I learn and grow in that relationship is through the Bible which can be considered religious. So principles and foundations that is in that book kind of guide and dictates how I live my life. (Sasha)

I also associate my spirituality with Christianity. Based on religious practice, we are supposed to show the way to other people. (Mary)
To me religion is a bunch of different rules or rituals. The protocol, I guess. People have different church backgrounds and traditions, so to me it is not spirituality, but more like a guideline. (Louise)

When you talk about religion, religion is just—I cannot say the church, because God is the church—but religion is just traditions customs. (Taylor)

I never associated my religion with my spirituality. I attend church because the Word, the Bible, reminds us that it is important to fellowship and center ourselves with like-minded people. (LaShanta)

Bender (2007) argued that students use religion and spirituality to shape their position on college campuses. He wrote that students and people identify to be religious or spiritual based on the social context of their surroundings. To say that one is spiritual “denotes the speaker’s rejection to mainstream, organized religions” (p.5). Most women of this study did denounce the connection to common man-made traditions and customs while others agreed with research findings that articulated that spirituality is an individual part of religion (Bender, 2007; Mattis, 2002; Newlin et al., 2002; Tisdell, 2007).

**Spiritual Revelation: God’s Voice**

> And your ears will hear a word behind you, saying, “This is the way; walk in it, when you turn to the right hand and when you turn to the left” (New International Version, Isaiah 30:20-22).

The words from Isaiah articulated why each participant of this study strongly believed that God spoke or speaks to them through their educational journey Thoughts arise in our minds and consume our spirits. This is considered revelation. Our spirituality is significant to us. It is a relationship and connection with God, through which we receive spiritual revelations.
Revelations from God, addresses a few points: 1) We receive a better understanding of God, 2) We analyze and comprehend circumstances with more clarity, 3) We are able to continuously acknowledge what God has done on our behalf and his plans for our future, 4) We begin to see truth, 5) It acts as a guide in our actions and decisions, and 6) It creates a testimony (Swinburne, 2007; Witherspoon, 2008).

The women of this study shared their revelations:

God would wake me up and I would get up with it clear in my mind the way I needed to go, I ran into a lot of challenges with that. (Louise)

I would lie down to go to sleep and he would wake me up at 2:00 o’clock in the morning and whatever the issue that I was having with my assignment and it would be fresh in my mind. (Louise)

God will just talk to me at 3:30 in the morning and would say, this is what you need to do (Mary)

So, that is when I just say my little prayer and I say, okay God, and “Enlighten me.” (Sasha)

Revelations from God have helped me and the others get through school. Even as this dissertation has evolved, I have had several things revealed to me. Writing my literature review was a very challenging process for me. As I worked with my editor, she advised some strategies to help articulate my agenda. I remember feeling as if I understood what she was saying to me, but had no vision. One night after finally laying my head to rest, I woke abruptly out of my sleep and instantly, I knew how to guide the chapter. I strongly believe that it was God’s voice and he whispered in my ear the path I should take.
Conversations with God

“The one who keeps God's commands lives in him, and he in them. And this is how we know that he lives in us: We know it by the Spirit he gave us” (New International Version, John 3:24).

When is the last time you talked to God? Brazleton (2005) acknowledged that to understand purpose, there has to be in-depth conversation with God. Those conversations lead us to overcome burdens and provide us with confidence, self-esteem, and strength in academia (Patton-McClure, 2009; Watt, 2003).

I talk to God….But God showed me what He wants me to do. God had told me. I was talking to Him about things and He said, ‘Put me in the center. Put me in the center and everything you want will come.’ (Mary)

I remember saying those exact same words to Him because that is how I talk to Him. I talk to God. My spirit talks to God. Just as I talk to people, I talk to Him and I am straight up with Him. (Louise)

I just always went down on my knees. (Taylor)

I asked God to guide our household and our lives …God and I have had some very emotional and humbling conversations. (LaShanta)

On my journey, I sometimes think that I am driving God crazy because I talk to him so much; I pray. In assessing all of our testimonies, we all prayed. Prayer is defined by Lawson and Thomas (2007) as “talking to God minute to minute as a personal and intimate habit (p. 346). For me, it is a one on one relationship with God that makes me feel secure in my choices and strong in my actions. It takes away the fear and stress (Patton & McClure, 2009). My convictions are real. Every outcome from a test, a written essay, or advancement to the next level has been
successful in some way, even if grade wise I failed. I feel as if I don’t have to fight the battle, but like Louise stated, “you just have to do the work.” I stayed committed to the purpose and prayed frequently. He (God) handled all the rest…whatever obstacle that may be and showed me favor (Lawson & Thomas, 2007).

**Strength**

The results showed that having a strong spiritual mind and connection with God strengthened me and the women throughout our academic journeys. Being centered in our spirituality permitted faith and hope, which we have leaned on to survive and be strong (Cozart, 2010):

You have to believe in something and you have to believe something is going to give you the strength to get to get through and get that work turned in. (Sasha)

That was my foundation, their strong beliefs made mine unwavering…I cannot live without Him. There is no way I would survive. There are too many demons out there trying to attack you. But everything that God gives you, you have to use it for His glory …I am a child of the most High God. I can see the end of the tunnel. I know I am going to make it. There have been a lot of blood, sweat, and tears. (Mary)

My spirituality had a lot to do with how I reacted on things in school and life. It strengthened me. It definitely strengthened me. I have been able to handle things that would normally wipe somebody out. (Louise)

I think being strong in my spirituality and having a relationship with God has strengthened me over the years. I cannot do anything. I do not care whether it is education, life, I do not care. Whatever it is, whatever challenge, I have, I need, God. I need God not just for the challenges, but my everyday life. (Taylor)
I have been weary. When I think about length of time to degree and the stumbling blocks particularly with my writing and my other responsibilities, I know that it is my spiritual strength that has pushed me forward. (LaShanta)

Patton and McClure (2009) found that the women in their study, who experienced abuse, rape, parenting, and multi responsibilities, showed a sign on resilience because of their spirituality, calling themselves “more than conquers” (p. 47). It complements the lyrics of a song by Kirk Franklin (1997), “Because I Got Faith”:

I can climb a mountain.

Said I can reach my goal.

I am more than a conqueror.

Down in my soul.

How Would God Respond?

“I'll place my spirit within you, empowering you to live according to my regulations and to keep my just decrees” (New International Version, Ezekiel 36:27).

One very significant find from this study is how we as participants deal with oppression. Spirituality helped us evolve. Generett and Cozart (2011) discussed how their spirituality as Black female faculty helped them overcome levels of marginalization and how it instead aided them in promoting spiritual pedagogy. Because oppression is present for Black female adult learners in higher education (Johnson-Bailey, 1994; Sealey-Ruiz, 2007b, Thomas, 2001), the participants shared how they at times responded:

When you have an inner spirituality, I think you are more self-aware of how you impact others around you. (Sasha)

I put God in it regardless of what they have to say... The Bible is the code for your life
and if you know you are doing something wrong, why are you going to do it? If the heart is not right, how can you sleep at night? People have no heart, no faith in God. (Mary)

Without my relationship with God, I probably would have been angry, upset or holding a grudge. Yet because of my relationship with God, I do not see seek revenge for anything. God says he takes care of everything so whatever injustice has been done; God is going to take care of it in the end. (Louise)

I am not sure that it was the God in me that let it go, or maybe it was. You are not really supposed to stir up stuff and start problems….It was the God in me who said, ‘Do not speak on it.’ You are not knowingly supposed to hurt people and put obstacles in their way. (Taylor)

In the time of trouble when the enemy is trying to weigh me down, I focus on you Lord and peace I have found. (LaShanta)

This section was titled, “How would God respond? Collins (1998) wrote that “Spirituality provides an important way that many Black women are moved to struggle for justice…Spirituality remains deeply intertwined with justice in Black women's intellectual history ... and thus influences Black women's critical social theory in particularly ways” (p. 244).

I have to believe that our experiences of oppression can at times become serve as a test of forgiveness. I have come to realize over time, that my spirituality has transformed anger from issues of class, race, gender, and age to forgiveness. hooks (2000) expresses that she had to receive love in order to show love. Many individuals do not know love. But God, who is the foundation of our spirituality has spoken in the Bible, that He is love (1 John 4:8).

It startled me to find that Sasha had not experienced racism, or more so, did not recognize that racism had more than likely affected her life. Bell (1992) suggested that racism is a weaved
into society and has become a permanent component to the world in which we live. With that said, the testimonies, particularly Sasha’s point to not having experienced racism could be due in part to how spirituality challenged them to show continuous love and forgives that ultimately overpowered oppression.

Walker’s conceptual framework of womanism demystifies Black women in a language that disaffirms the negativity that has been carried on their shoulders historically. Walker (1983) prepares her prose to compliment and testify to others that Black women are rich in knowledge, strong, and spiritual beings.

**Summary**

The three major categories found in this project compliments Walker’s concept. The Womanist profile of Black female adult learners was enhanced as a result of the findings acknowledging that Black female adult learners have purpose, were transformed and changed through challenges throughout their academic experiences, and strongly portrayed that Black women not only loves the spirit, but more importantly, the God whose spirit lives within them.

Black female adult learners are determined, passionate, and spiritual beings. They enter the university with purpose, whether it is for professional growth, their children, their community, or simply for self. In reviewing the data, it was interesting to discover that the levels of marginalization, such as race, class, gender were not expressed as pressing issues. It seemed as elements of oppression were more expected and from a cultural perspective, the women of this study did not focus on them. It also referenced the forgiving heart that the women of the study exemplified.

Secondly, a change occurred in the lives of the women that transformed them through learning. The struggle with change was due to their age, multiple responsibilities, and being able
to connect with others physically. The powerful component however were that through the experience, new skills were acquired, their written communication was developing and enhancing, and their confidence increased.

Spirituality was the most important piece. The testimonies made it clear and evident that God was the source of strength, adversity, and a guide to leading each member of this research to their purpose. The spiritual connection to God that was expressed became the source with how obstacles were addressed in school. The data revealed that strong communication with God kept them focused and willing to press forward.

**A Testifying Womanist**

Womanist epistemology heavily present in the spirit of Black women (Witherspoon, 2008). The women of this study showed this statement to have validity by mentioning their spiritual connectedness with God. The circumstance of the educational environment challenges the spirit creating the need to rely on God to overcome or to trust God if the struggle remains for a while (Baker-Fletcher, 2006). Black female adult learners experienced this dynamic frequently, yet, were not waivered because of the deep rooted beliefs that modified how they worked with and through situations (Baker-Fletcher, 2006; Floyd-Thomas, 2006).

The JOURNEY and all it encompasses is reason to testify! We each place in our hearts that through it all, there should be peace. We developed that peace with our relationship with God who influenced how we walked on the brittle path.
CHAPTER VI: SUMMARY, LIMITATIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

I sit as the outsider, looking within the walls of the university.

I try to imagine what the outcome will be for me.

I then know, I must get down on my knees.

For it will be my God who claims victory.

(Self)

Summary

The purpose of this research study was to explore the experience of Black female adult learners and how spirituality influences their academic journey. For Black female adult learners, their spiritual relationship with God served as a foundation for prevailing in the academy. In facing multiple challenges and life circumstances, the women of this study proved that God was a sounding board, confidant, and guide. As a result, spirituality was significant in the lives of the Black female adult learners in this study as it reinforced courage, strength, wisdom, and faith. It gave the participants the ability to exhibit integrity, character, and love.

As a recap, Chapter I provided an introduction that provided justification to why there was a need to study Black female adult learners by introducing the statement problem and background. It also presented the guided research questions and definition and terms related to the project.

The second chapter portrayed the profile of a Black female adult learner by embracing the theoretical concept of Walker’s (1983) womanist theory and incorporating the outsider within ideology. The chapter further explores the historical experiences of Black women in college and an all-inclusive review of Black female adult learners dating back to the first study conducted in
Finally, the chapter outlines the spiritual perspective of Black female adult learners by providing cultural and historical literature.

Chapter III introduced the research design that incorporated two driving methodologies; narrative inquiry and autoethnography. The researcher was placed, who was a member of the subgroup, actively included her narrative in the findings and throughout the study to analytically interpret and reflect on the connection and relations between self and the remaining participants.

The participants were selected through a snowball effect that helped to identify persons willing and openly wanting to share their story. Being presented through oral presentation, the narratives were defined as testimonials. Emergent themes and categories were exemplified as a result of coding and using bracketing as a method of validation.

Chapter IV, presented the findings. The findings were the testimonies of each participant, while Chapter V provided discussion and interpretation of the results.

This chapter, Chapter VI, summarizes the previous chapters, discussed the limitations of the research, provided implications of the research, and shared recommendations for future research.

**Limitations**

An obvious limitation for the study was its sample size. The size was limited to five Black female adult learners, one of whom was the researcher. Choosing a small sample size did not permit for a comprehensive representation of Black female adult learners. However, selecting a small number of participants from the targeted population allowed the interviews as the instrument for data collection to be more replete and in-depth (Hoopes, 1979; Witherspoon, 2008).
Another limitation was the inclusion of the researcher in the study. The dissertation was written from an autoethnographic point of view, which presented challenges of incorporating self (researcher) within the culture and remaining objective. In addition, because autoethnography allows the writer to use creative style and story, developing an academic document embracing both traditional and contemporary research methods proved to be a challenge.

Participants attending college both online and on-campus was an unforeseen limitation. The literature available and presented in this research project reflects Black female adult learners who are attending colleges and universities on campus at particularly traditional campuses (Henry, 1985; Johnson-Bailey, 1994; & Thomas 2001). In addition, online students did not have the opportunity to interact socially or experience campus life as similar to that of traditional campuses. This absence limited the overall collegiate experience that could be shared by participants who did attend physically on campus. However, the majority of the participants attended full-time or part-time as an online students which brought about new perspectives and phenomenon to the study.

**Food for Thought: Implications and Recommendations for Future Research**

The dependency of personal connection to a higher, spiritual power for the women of this study drove their purpose and transformation. Bender (2007), Tisdell (2003) and Dirkx (1997) indicated that spirituality is a rising, unquestionable complex and binding factor in the lives of collegiate students. For the participants, it manifested ultimately to their success and survival. In order to continue exploring the topic, a more in-depth study on adult students, religion, and spirituality (Bender, 2007; Tisdell, 2003) would be noteworthy. Research could also be further conducted to enhance the literature on Black female adult learners and spirituality on other ways. Although not intended, this study included all women who referred to and relied on their spiritual
relationship from a biblical guide and modeled a Christ-like lifestyle. Collecting data on additional Black female adult students who do not identify with any religious affiliation or practice Christianity, but another religion, would be significant as we proceed in researching the topic of spirituality and religion on college campuses.

This dissertation purposely examined the academic passage with the intent of investigating the spiritual component of the adult learner. However, research can be continued by reconnoitering this work or something similar addressing two major areas, Fatalism vs. God’s Will. The question could have been asked if the outcome of the participants was inevitable, regardless of their spiritual perspective. Whether prayer and a relationship with God existed or not, could their journey’s simply been destined? Could all events of the academic journey have been determined by fate as Espinosa de los Monteros and Gallo (2011) discussed in their research regarding a population of color and health? Theologians could counter this train of thought to expound upon the Holy Bible, book of Romans, chapters 8 through 12, to support that spirituality encompasses God’s will. While many spiritual beings who practice Christianity believe that life is predetermined, as it reads in Romans 8: 29, individuals still have to make decisions in everyday life to follow and abide by the will of God. In the academy, understanding these dynamics is important as more studies on spirituality in higher education are being done. Individuals are extremely diverse and beliefs vary. It is important however, to note that the foundation for the Black female adult learners in this study, were clear and constant. They continuously expressed that God, their choices, and their relationship with what they believe to be an omnipotent power was the primary reason they were able to achieve and overcome.

Having such a steadfast position regarding their faith can also challenge experiences in a world that constantly seeks to find answers regarding faith, religion, and spirituality. Inquiring
how the secular and spiritual realms compliment or contradict one another is also something that can be considered. Only one of the participants attended a religious affiliated school. The others were exposed to more secular environments. Mary still was challenged at a religious based institution and felt that she had to fearlessly discuss God in her academic blogs. Taylor was resilient in voicing that, “there is only one God that we serve, and it is not Buddha.” Because of their spiritual connection with God and sound beliefs, the participants responded to incidents throughout their journey steadfast and strong, unwavering from their spiritual position. Does the believer become discriminated because of their unyielding standpoint or are they the biased ones? Hyers and Hyers (2008) found that discrimination did exist amongst conservative Christians in their work. Providing further insight could examine how Black female adult learners are treated and challenged because of their strong spiritual stances in a secular environment.

Other areas that brought about questions were in reference to the community, socio-economic status of the participants, the age of the participants, and their struggle around writing. Being able to give back to the community for the women in this study also deemed important. They stressed that their reasons for returning were beyond self and immediate family. This is important to recognize because it provides a significant connection to the spiritual notion that it is imperative that one reaches into the community to, as Taylor noted, “Bring people to God.” Further investigation on how spirituality evolves into evangelism could be considered.

The research was also composed of majority middle-class. With the economy spiraling, evaluating the reasons, challenges, and spiritual position of women in less fortunate economic circumstances would help further assess if spirituality is indeed a necessary factor for success and survival in higher education.
The women of the study also expressed that they were in school for professional growth and job attainment. The job market is extremely competitive and companies are looking for young, inexperienced, energetic employees (Kimmel, Gaylor, Grubbs, & Hayes, 2011). Organizations are looking at who they can hire to work harder for less, (Kimmel, et al., 2011). In addition, Black female adult learners live with the double jeopardy of race and gender and are significantly paid less than men or White women significantly (Anderson, 2013; Williams & Wiggins, 2010). Therefore, investigating the success or failure of job obtainment after graduation for adult learners would be noteworthy.

Last, the study revealed that Black female learners struggle with academic writing. Recasner (2007) forcefully suggested that some negotiation has to take place in colleges and universities that allow the voice of students to be welcomed as respected academic discourse. If there were more compromise, Black female adult learners and other students in our position would thrive.

**Final Remarks**

Black female adult learners, according to Miles (2009), are motivated to be in school. There reasons are both complex and personal. Yet, higher education is the arena that enables Black female adult learners the opportunity to expand their lives professionally, individually, and for the community (Coker, 2001; Miles, 2009; Sealey-Ruiz, 2007a; Thomas, 2001). Despite the fact that this population is enrolling in vast numbers, challenges still occur. Spirituality has been the source for survival.

I read so much to prepare for this study. I wanted a deep understanding of how Black female adult learners had been positioned in the literature overtime. Our story is unique. After all, it is our story. What I have come to realize is that our everyday experience makes us stronger
and rich in knowing who we are as Black women and whose we are as a child of God. We have a purpose. Reasons that guided us back into the classroom supported literature (Johnson-Bailey, 1998; Coker, 2001, Thomas, 2001, Sealey-Ruiz, 2007) and it also emerged new themes. In being present in school, we began to transform as we welcomed new challenges and adjusted to old ones, like oppression.

When I begin to hear the testimonies of not only the four participants, but that of my own, I realized that we had come to expect and adapt to the societal stronghold that have historically smothered the lives of Black women for hundreds of years. Our vision for success went far beyond defeating the triple oppression. We have evolved as a spiritual group and our response to obstacles was grounded in our faith, our love, and our spiritual walk. This study did not focus on simply the here and now. Each of our testimonies revealed how we had advanced as students and as spiritual beings. The journey had been one of growth, development, and understanding.

I made note that the older we got (Louise and Taylor) the more profound we were. Louise and Taylor never once hesitated to put “God all in the mix” of their success, the failures, their joy and their peace. While Sasha, Mary and I wholeheartedly acknowledged God and His noteworthy presence in our lives, as I read between the lines, I saw elements of our lives that tested our faith even though we believed and trusted God. Regardless, we continued to press on toward the mark of completion, victory, and achievement.

Our spiritual growth was important. As the results reveal, it was essential to our success, failures, coping, and commitment. Our connection to a higher being expanded our outsider within status. Being “possessors of knowledge” our experiences are a foundation for future literature that is true and valid (Heath, 2006). That truth lies in what Taylor (1998) calls
witnessing. We have used our trials and tribulations, our joys and accomplishments to bear witness and bring about a new story of the Black adult female learner.

Collins (1986) wrote that our outsider within status would not necessarily identify with the personal and cultural experiences that we have upon entering the academy. In fact, we were socialized and had to adapt to our new world. Adaptation generated new perspectives and insight unique and independent to our previous “experienced realities” (p. 26). Now, we carry dual worldviews creating a standpoint that only the outsider within can vividly explain.

Our voices throughout this document may have made some individuals smile, others may have disagreed, and even more may have taken offense to some of our words. Yet, the reality is that the testimonies were honest and candid, therefore real and we believe of God. As Cozart (2010) emphasized, the marginality of being an outsider within not only presented a “distinctive angle,” but also “prompted me to include a discussion of spirituality in my work” without fear or apology (p. 252). I believe our voices have something valuable to offer. In fact, I think the academy will welcome the research, just as we had to welcome the rules, policies, and traditions of the institution. It is a strategy for change and evolution. I am honored to have been able to survive the storm. It made us better, more complete and liberated.

As I conclude, I realize that this long, hard, and most weathering journey is only the beginning to more in-depth research. I saw with clarity that there is still so much more to be done, said, and shared. Our testimonials run deep. We can provide valuable information for colleges and universities. Our voices can help other women achieve their goals. In essence, I am just waiting for the next journey to begin. Like so much of my educational career, this particular experience was a sacrifice. Yet God, held my hand and the others. We have left significant words
to ponder, and we have noted that undeniably our relationship with God has moved us forward, kept us strong, and grounded us for a better tomorrow.
References


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http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/phenomenology


Russell, Michele. (1982). Black-Eyed blues connections: Teaching Black women. In Gloria T. Hull, Patricia Bell Scott, & Barbara Smith (Eds.), *All the women are white, all the blacks are men, but some of us are brave: Black women's studies*. New York, NY: Feminist Press.


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Appendix A

Information Sheet

Information Sheet for Research (Electronic)
University of Cincinnati

Department: College of Education, Criminal Justice and Human Services
Principal Investigator: LaShanta Jones
Faculty Advisor: Dr. Vanessa Allen-Brown

Title of Study: The Spiritual Journey: Black Adult Learners in Higher Education

Introduction:
You are being asked to take part in a research study. Please read this paper carefully and ask questions about anything that you do not understand.

Who is doing this research study?
The person in charge of this research study is LaShanta Y. Jones of the University of Cincinnati College of Education, Criminal Justice and Human Services, Educational Studies Program. LaShanta Jones is being guided in this research by Dr. Vanessa Allen-Brown.

What is the purpose of this research study?
The purpose of this research study is to explore the experience of Black female adult learners and how spirituality influences their academic journey.

Who will be in this research study?
This study will focus on the recruitment of four women, ranging in age of 35 to 65, who are currently enrolled or are recent graduates (within the past two years) of an undergraduate or a graduate degree program. The participant should be an adult learner. The final participant will be the researcher.

What will you be asked to do in this research study, and how long will it take?
Unstructured narrative interviews will be used for this study. Guided questions were designed to initiate narratives and gain initial responses from subjects outside of the researcher. Initial interviews will be 1-2 hours in length with possible follow-up interviews if needed.

Are there any risks to being in this research study?
It is not expected that the participant will be exposed to any risk by being in this research study. Participants can refuse to answer any question at any time.

Are there any benefits from being in this research study?
This study will allow participants to share their experience and story; but was not designed for any direct benefit to the participant. Being in this study however, may help
higher education administrators further understand the academic experience of Black female adult learners and how spirituality plays a role in their lives as students and may influence new policies, procedures, and curriculums.

**What will you get because of being in this research study?**
To thank participants for being in the study, your time, and travel dinner or lunch will be provided for you at the time of the interview.

**Do you have choices about taking part in this research study?**
Participation in this study is voluntary. At any time, you are able to withdraw from the study.

**How will your research information be kept confidential?**
Identifiable data will be collected on the demographic sheet in order to assess basic information regarding the participant, and related information regarding the participant (such as children’s names and age) to allow the research to follow along as the narrative is shared. All collected data will be stored in a locked cabinet and data will be destroyed properly upon the closure of the study. Any future publications or conference presentations will include pseudonyms for participants and non-identifiable data only.

**What are your legal rights in this research study?**
Nothing in the consent form waives any legal rights participants may have. The consent form also does not release the investigator, the University of Cincinnati, or its agents from liability for negligence.

**What if you have questions about this research study?**
If you have any questions or concerns about this research study, you should contact LaShanta Jones at 513-290-1696. Or, you may contact Dr. Vanessa Allen –Brown at Vanessa.Allen-Brown@uc.edu.

The UC Institutional Review Board reviews all research projects that involve human participants to be sure the rights and welfare of participants are protected.

If you have questions about your rights as a participant or complaints about the study, you may contact the UC IRB at (513) 558-5259. Or, you may call the UC Research Compliance Hotline at (800) 889-1547, or write to the IRB, 300 University Hall, ML 0567, 51 Goodman Drive, Cincinnati, OH 45221-0567, or email the IRB office at irb@ucmail.uc.edu.

**Do you HAVE to take part in this research study?**
No one has to be in this research study. Refusing to take part will NOT cause any penalty or loss of benefits that you would otherwise have. You may start and then change your mind and stop at any time. To stop participation in the study, you should tell LaShanta Jones at 513-290-1696.

BY TAKING PART IN THESE ACTIVITIES YOU INDICATE YOUR CONSENT FOR YOUR ANSWERS TO BE USED IN THIS RESEARCH STUDY. PLEASE KEEP THIS INFORMATION SHEET FOR YOUR REFERENCE.
Appendix B

Consent

Adult Consent Form for Research (Interview)
University of Cincinnati

Department: College of Education, Criminal Justice and Human Services
Principal Investigator: LaShanta Jones
Faculty Advisor: Dr. Vanessa Allen-Brown

Title of Study: The Spiritual Journey: Black Adult Learners in Higher Education

Introduction:
You are being asked to take part in a research study. Please read this paper carefully and ask questions about anything that you do not understand.

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Who will be in this research study?
This study will focus on the recruitment of four women who are currently enrolled or a recent graduate (within the past two years) of an undergraduate or a graduate degree. The participant should be an adult learner: 1) an individual beyond the age of 24, 2) one who returns to school after experiencing a break between any education experience, and/or 3) one who is financially independent or does not rely on parental support. Third, the participant must be willing to share her experience in higher education and her perception of spirituality and its relation to the academic journey.

What will you be asked to do in this research study, and how long will it take?
Each interview is private and separate. All participants will be asked to complete a demographic sheet that should take approximately ten minutes to complete. Participants will then participate in a semi-structured interview for 1-2 hours in length. They will also be asked to make themselves available for review of the transcribed, possible clarification, and/or possible follow-up questions.

Are there any risks to being in this research study?
It is not expected that you will be exposed to any risk by being in this research study. You can refuse to answer any questions that you do not want to answer.
Are there any benefits from being in this research study?
This study will allow you to share your experience and story; however, you will probably not get any benefit of being in this study. But, being in this study may help higher education administrators further understand the academic experience of Black female adult learners and how spirituality plays a role in their lives as students and may influence new policies, procedures, and curriculums.

What will you get because of being in this research study?
To thank you for being in the study, your time, and travel dinner or lunch will be provided for you at the time of the interview. The Principal Investigator (PI) will ask the participant what they would like to eat based on the local moderately priced - $15 or under - restaurants in the area of the interview (Please note that this may be the cafeteria of their workplace). After the interview is complete, the PI and participant will go to the local restaurant to purchase the lunch or dinner that the participant desires. The PI will not stay for lunch, but only purchase the meal. The PI will only purchase the meal to go. If the participant has no desire to eat at the end of the interview, a $15 gift card will be purchased at the restaurant that the participant chooses. The funding for the lunch is solely out of the financial pocket of the PI. Therefore, the budget was decided based on the financial means of the PI and keeping it within the rules of providing incentives for participants.

Do you have choices about taking part in this research study?
Participation in this study is voluntary. At any time, you are able to withdraw from the study.

How will your research information be kept confidential?
Information about you will be kept private. Identifiable data will be collected on the demographic sheet in order to assess basic information regarding the participant, and related information regarding the participant (such as children’s names and age) to allow the research to follow along as the narrative is shared. All collected data will be stored in a locked cabinet and data will be destroyed properly upon the closure of the study.

Your information will be kept in a locked cabinet in the office of the Principal Investigator for the length of the study. Once the interviews are transcribed, the initial recordings will be place in the locked cabinet and the transcripts will be given an ID number to replace identifiable information. The recorded interviews and demographic sheet will be destroyed within two years after the study is closed, as recommended by the University. The digital recording will be deleted and the demographic sheet will be shredded. The signed consent documents must be kept for a minimum of three years after the study is closed.

However, please be mindful that the study could be published or presented at a scholarly conference. In such an instance, pseudonyms and only non-identifiable data will be used.

What are your legal rights in this research study?
Nothing in this consent form waives any legal rights you may have. This consent form also does not release the investigator, the University of Cincinnati, or its agents from liability for negligence.

**What if you have questions about this research study?**
If you have any questions or concerns about this research study, you should contact LaShanta Jones at 513-290-1696. Or, you may contact Dr. Vanessa Allen –Brown at Vanessa.Allen-Brown@uc.edu.

The UC Institutional Review Board reviews all research projects that involve human participants to be sure the rights and welfare of participants is protected.

If you have questions about your rights as a participant or complaints about the study, you may contact the UC IRB at (513) 558-5259. Or, you may call the UC Research Compliance Hotline at (800) 889-1547, or write to the IRB, 300 University Hall, ML 0567, 51 Goodman Drive, Cincinnati, OH 45221-0567, or email the IRB office at irb@ucmail.uc.edu.

**Do you HAVE to take part in this research study?**
No one has to be in this research study. Refusing to take part will NOT cause any penalty or loss of benefits that you would otherwise have. You may start and then change your mind and stop at any time. To stop participation in the study, you should tell LaShanta Jones at 513-290-1696.

**Agreement:**
Participant Name (please print) ____________________________________________

Participant Signature _____________________________________________ Date ______

Signature of Person Obtaining Consent _____________________________ Date ______

BY TAKING PART IN THIS INTERVIEW, YOU INDICATE YOUR CONSENT FOR YOUR ANSWERS TO BE USED IN THIS RESEARCH STUDY.

PLEASE KEEP THIS INFORMATION SHEET FOR YOUR REFERENCE.
Appendix C

Demographic Sheet

Name _____________________________________
Age ___________
Institution _____________________________________

Year in College

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<th>Sophomore</th>
<th>Pre-Junior/Junior</th>
<th>Senior</th>
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<td>Freshman</td>
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<td>Masters</td>
<td>Doctorate</td>
<td>Other</td>
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</table>

Current University Grade Point Average____________________
Department/College _____________________ Major___________________

If this is not your first time attending college, please list all previous collegiate institutions
__________________, ___________________, ___________________

Who influenced your decision to return to school? ___________________

Married or Single
If married, did your spouse complete college or is he/she currently enrolled? _______

Number of Children / N/A

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Are you employed?
Place of Employment _________________________________
Number of Years Employed ___________________________
Income
0 – $30K     31K – 55K     55K – 100K    100K
Are you receiving any of the following?
Loans  Scholarships  Grants  Fellowships
Appendix D

Guided Interview Schedule

1. Could you each briefly describe your journey?

2. How do you, as a Black female adult learner, conceptualize and define spirituality?

3. Is your spiritual perspective designed from your cultural experience, life experience, or other?

4. How has spirituality acted as an overall factor for academic success and/or failure throughout your journey?

5. Have you been able to find equilibrium between being a spiritual Black female (per your definition) and a student?

6. As you have aged, has the level of spiritual connectedness challenged or strengthened your academic journey?

7. How do you envision your journey’s outcome?
Appendix E

Recruitment Message

Hello –

I hope this message finds you well. I am currently at the dissertation stage of my program and I am interested in studying spirituality and its influence on Black female adult learners.

I have always been interested in adult learners and Black females in higher education. My passion for this emerged from my own experience as a traditionally aged student, now adult learner. As I ponder on my own reflections, I found myself simply curious to know if others experience what I did. More so, I wanted to be a vehicle in which the story could be told since little has been done on the topic. If you know anyone who meets the criteria below, please have them contact me at jonly@uc.email.edu.

Criteria
A Black female, ranging in age of 35 to 65, who are currently enrolled or are recent graduates (within the past two years) of an undergraduate or a graduate degree program. The participant should be an adult learner: 1) an individual beyond the age of 24, 2) one who has returned to school after experiencing a break between any education experiences, 3) one who has attempted to be financially independent or does not rely on parental support, and 4) the participant must be willing to share her experience in higher education and her perception of spirituality and its relation to the academic journey.

Thank you and have a great day!
Appendix F

Recruitment Response Email

Hello. My name is LaShanta Jones; I spoke with you regarding your possible participation in my dissertation study at the University of Cincinnati. After careful review of possible selections, I believe that you are an ideal choice for participation. Would you be willing to be part of the study?