Written by Artspace, Irma McClaurin, PhD, Culture and Education Editor
Wednesday, 21 November 2012 18:47

"I really have no regrets. I can go freely. There are things that I didn't accomplish that I wanted to but I have learned how to let go. I would have liked to have done more, and if I had more time, I would have done so." Dr. Elvyn Jones-Dube

Human beings, *homo sapiens*, or anthropology's political correct AMH (anatomically modern humans) are a unique species among mammals. We have culture, which according to my colleagues, has been our primary means of adaptation.

Through culture we have learned how to adapt to our environment by creating houses to shelter us from heat and cold, clothing to protect us from the elements as well as symbolize ideas of decency and propriety. We developed sun tan lotions to protect us from the sun and solar panels to harness the sun's power for energy. We created cooking to help us digest a variety of foods that contributed to our survival, and may have help trigger the development of our brain. And, we have created cultural rituals like marriage to facilitate the reproduction of the species and further social and economic relations.

Culture and Rituals: "What's Love Got to Do with It?"

Yes, some anthropologists believe that marriage has little to do with love and a lot to do with

economic and political social relations, developing domestic unions, and establishing blood lines. Look at the historical marriages of the aristocracy—they occurred to cement alliances, further the accumulation of wealth, produce an heir, and solidify power. Love had very little to do with it.

We might ask ourselves how much has changed in this ritual through the centuries, especially since the sticking points in most modern divorces is property division and custody of the children—sometimes in that order of priorities. Marriage has been a mechanism for upward social mobility, and the entire concept of prenuptials is about making sure that a person entering into the social arrangement of marriage doesn't take more than what they came with, or leaves with a predetermined agreed-upon amount—sort of like negotiating with a car dealer.

"I have no regrets; I can really go freely." EJD

Culture and Death

As humans, from the moment we are born, we are destined to die. And perhaps the most meaningful, and as some anthropologists' believe the "...most distinctively human..." cultural practice we have developed is that surrounding death. We have rituals of funerals, burials, and memorial services to celebrate and mourn the dead. They enable us to contend with the fact of our mortality, come to terms with the death of a loved one, and prepare us for life afterwards as a survivor. And our practices of religion, regardless of the faith, help us to explain and understand the inexplicable.

...Not only are they [funeral rituals and burial practices] deeply associated with religious beliefs about the nature of death and the existence of an afterlife, but they also have important psychological, sociological, and symbolic functions for the survivors. Thus, the study of the ways in which the dead are treated in different cultures leads to a better understanding of the many diverse views about death and dying, as well as of human nature.

For all our talents as a species, facing the death of a family member or a friend doesn't get any easier. Death is the final frontier. It is the moment at which we recognize the limitations of our existence and the limitations of our power as one of the most unique species of mammals.

As evolved as we believe ourselves to be, we have not yet figured out how to prevent that final phase in the circle of life. We can prolong the onset of aging and diseases, but we can't stop the death clock. We are powerful in our ability to manipulate our environment, expand the borders of our universe through space travel, and slow down the aging process through replacements of essential parts—hearts, hip joints, knee joints, valves, limbs, and soon even our face. We can forestall the inevitable, but we have not yet found a way to stop the death clock.

"I have no regrets; I can really go freely." EJD

A Farewell Requiem for a Friend

The passing of my friend, Dr. Elvyn Jones-Dube, on November 14, 2012, two days before her 64th birthday, is a lesson in dying with dignity that I wish to share with you. I am angry with myself because I had wanted to write about Elvyn's life when she could still read it. I blew that opportunity, but I am determined to complete the promise I made.

After living with breast cancer since the age of thirty-nine and going through prescribed treatments of chemotherapy and radiation, all of which prolonged her life but robbed her of her hair and burned one of vocal chords, Elvyn decided four months ago she had had enough with medical interventions.

She felt the quality of the final days of her life was more important at this juncture. Chemotherapy was proving to be more a hindrance than a help—take the chemo and then spend two weeks in the hospital recovering. Elvyn decided this was not how she wanted to spend the last days, weeks, or months of her life. And so she checked into a hospice program that would assist her with "comfort care," but at home among her own stuff. No tubes, no anonymous beds or spaces surrounded by people and things she didn't know. She would spend her final days at home in the little apartment in Richmond, VA.

She texted me on July 31, 2012, "FYI, I am done with chemo & have shifted 2 hospice. Hope 2 get through 2012. No major pain so far. Talk soon. Hugs." The doctors gave her six months; the cancer had spread. And she almost made it.

We spoke over the next several months and in October, I joined a contingent of children, siblings, and friends who banded together to spend time with Elvyn as she prepared herself to transition at home rather than in a hospital. In total, I was able to be with her for over three weeks.

She was going to do this "her way." And so one day she announced that she needed some sun. The solution was a trip to a sunny climate. Even as we made plans, it was all provisional because we never knew if she would be able to make the trip, but we planned it as if she would. And she did.

We spent eight days in the U.S. Virgin Islands—her last trip, as she referred to it. She was able to bask in the sun, get a tan, and watch water that was at times turquoise, aquamarine, and varying shades of blue, and sleep to the sound of the Caribbean Sea slapping the shore line silly. Every morning, she had tea on the little veranda of where we stayed in Cottages by the Sea, St. Croix. She would then sit for two hours in the sun, listening to her favorite music on her iPad, which one of her sons had given her.

While everyone on the mainland was preparing for Hurricane Sandy, we experienced strong waves but nothing more on our little island get away. We had blue skies and water that looked like a gigantic blue jewel reflecting its brilliance every day and stretched out to the horizon where it sealed its fate with the sky. Our journey ended without incident, though it was increasingly apparent that Elvyn's health was on a decline.

During our time in the sun, I recorded Elvyn talking about her life, and why she had chosen to

go to the Peace Corp in Botswana and what had drawn her to marry a man (Mr. Alfred Dube) now retired, who became an Ambassador from Botswana to England, Sweden, Belgium, China and who knows where else, and raise three sons (Nyaladzi Nathan (34), Nkwebi Julien (28) and Wazha Daniel (26) who are truly global citizens of the world.

As we talked, I had a difficult time keeping track of all of Elvyn's global adventures and the people she'd had the opportunity to meet and interact with –former UN Leader Kofi Annan, Nelson Mandela, and of course all the heads of states she'd met and entertained.

I did meet one of her friends from her tour-of-duty in China who traveled from New York to visit Elvyn. Despite numerous airline delays, Carmen chose to visit anyway. In total she could only spend around four hours with Elvyn. But she was determined, and I was a fly on the wall listening to them reminiscing about their time together in Beijing, China, where, I learned, Elvyn had started a book club for expatriates, Chinese business people from Hong Kong, and diplomatic wives like herself.

"I have no regrets; I can really go freely." EJD

Just a Girl from Philly

[redacted]

[redacted]