

**The Curator Says...**Sometimes the best sermon is not in words but in the living presence of another person. This is how Betty Corbin describes her family maid, Nancy. From this childhood relationship comes a deep and abiding truth that lasts over a lifetime and reaches out to others.

## **Nancy's Legacy**

### **Betty Corbin**

Our maid Nancy was the first black person I ever knew. She came to work for us when I was a toddler and my sister Jean was a baby, and she stayed for over ten years. She was middle-aged, a stout woman with large bosoms, as we called them. She wore a cotton cloth tied around her head, kind of like Aunt Jemima, and she dipped snuff from a little round tin.

Nancy worked 9:00 to 5:00 Monday through Friday and a half day on Saturday for \$12 a week. She walked two or three miles to our house in the morning, and Daddy took her home at 5:00 when he got home from work. Sometimes I would ride with him. She lived in a tiny, shabby house, not much more than a shack that she rented for \$4 a month. It was on the other side of town, where the black people lived. Next door was a joint where blacks would gather to drink and party on Saturday nights. Sometimes on Monday morning Nancy would tell us about fights with knives or razor blades. Occasionally Daddy would kid her, "Nancy, are you taking up with one of those men?"

She always replied, "No sir, Mr. Turney, I don't want no man." Nancy had never been married, but she had a grown daughter, Natalie. I never met Natalie.

Nancy couldn't read or write. She said her father made her work in the fields instead of going to school. But she could cook and clean house and take care of children. She could make biscuits and cornbread and dressing for hen or turkey. She put in a handful of this and a pinch of that. Mamma said Nancy made the best dressing. She watched Nancy and tried to copy her but said hers never turned out as good. Often for Saturday lunch Nancy cooked fried flounder with mashed potatoes and hushpuppies, her favorite meal. I liked it, too.

As I went through elementary school and learned to read and write, I asked my mother, "How can Nancy manage in our modern world when she can't read and write?"

Mamma said, "It's hard, and it's easy for folks to take advantage of someone who can't read."

As Nancy aged and her eyesight failed, my parents helped her get glasses. But the time came when her vision was so poor that she had to retire. She probably had cataracts, but folks like Nancy didn't have insurance, didn't have surgery. My parents had paid social security taxes for her as she worked for them, and now they helped her get her social

security benefits. After she retired, we had other maids, but I don't remember them. Nancy is the one who helped raise me. She's the only one who's pictured in my childhood scrapbook.

In 1964 I graduated from Auburn High, a segregated school, and went to college at Auburn University, which integrated during my time there. But when I graduated, I doubt there were more than twenty black students at Auburn. I never had class with one.

After graduation I went to work for IBM in the computer services industry. Eight years later, in 1976, I was promoted and moved to Houston, the first woman manager in my division of the company. As part of the training for my new position, I went to a seminar in San Francisco on how to manage minorities. To raise our awareness of the difficulties that some minorities faced, the instructor used a film. It showed rows of tiny houses with peeling paint and dirt yards. The black people near the houses wore the worn clothes and the sad faces of poverty. To the others in the class it was just a film with nameless people in an unknown town. But to me it was Nancy, and I was slapped with the realization of how poor she had been. I started crying, not just a tear or two but tears streaming down my face. Crying was the last thing I wanted to do in a class full of male managers, but I couldn't stop. I was embarrassed and left the room. After all these years, I was crying for Nancy.

When the seminar was over, I made a commitment to myself to make an extra effort to be fair in hiring and managing minority employees. Also, I've had multiple opportunities over the years to respond when someone makes a general criticism about all black people. I tell them about the black people I worked with in Houston and the black people I taught in my computer and project management seminars at AUM. I say, "They're just like all of us—some are focused and work hard, some are not. Some are fast learners, some not so much. They're individuals."

I think Nancy would be pleased. Then again, Nancy was always pleased with me.



**Betty Corbin Says...** I grew up in Auburn, where I started my lifelong habit of journaling by writing in a pink plastic diary with a lock. After graduating from Auburn with a major in math and minors in English and education, I spent my career helping folks learn about computers and implement computer applications. I worked for huge computer companies like IBM and EDS and spent the end of my career at AUM teaching adults how to use computers. After spending over thirty years living in the huge cities of Atlanta and Houston followed by six years in Montgomery, my husband Carl and I moved to Auburn in 2009 and have loved being back. In addition to writing and going to OLLI classes, I enjoy playing golf, traveling, Auburn football, facilitating women's Bible study groups, and eating with Carl on our screen porch enjoying the view of the woods.