

KATHERINE BUTLER JONES, ED.D.

KATHERINE BUTLER JONES REFLECTS ON HER FAMILY'S HISTORY...THEN AND NOW.

“Deeper Roots” means deeper knowledge. Wanting to know more. It means that you go out and learn about the people who were in your family, about previous generations, and making that historic trip back to your place of origin. I had no idea how deep this was going to go.

I’m at an age in life when one starts looking back and thinking about the people who made you what you are. In your adult life, you’re too busy doing things. No time to reflect.

In our family, nothing was talked about. For many African American families the experiences were such negative ones that they wanted to forget what happened to them in times of slavery, so those stories weren’t really handed down. Reading Alex Haley’s book was a great inspiration toward writing my own autobiography. In fact, in our house, Hubie and I always celebrated Black History Month, with our children giving presentations and adult judges invited to comment on them. They’d write stories about figures like Harriet Tubman, or they’d read poetry, anything at all that was related to African American history, and now as adults those are the things that they remember.

I did most of the research before there was an Internet. The only thing I’d heard is that my father’s father had been an escaped slave from Richmond, Virginia. And I’d discovered some Revolutionary War-era farm records from where my people had been for generations. So I went down there. I remember one family that I had visited unannounced. I knocked on the door, and the woman says come right in. She had just come in from bagging a deer. I shared some of the records that I had found, and we realized that our families lived right next to each other many years ago. This kind of research is much more exciting when you’re doing it with other people than sitting in a library or staring at a computer screen.

My mother was very much hung up on Britain and the class system. She came from Jamaica, but with not a trace of a West Indies accent. She had a British accent, drank tea, had her pinky up, wore fur coats. When we interviewed at the Ethical Culture School, she told them she had gone to Oxford. I believed her and for years that’s what I had thought and that’s what I told people. Of course, it wasn’t true.

My mother was getting considerably older – she passed just before her 99th birthday – and came to live with us in Newton, vacating the New York apartment I grew up in. Going through my father’s papers and photographs, I came across many artifacts that reveal so much of my ancestry. Among them was my great grandparents’ marriage certificate. They were married in Troy, New York, by Bishop Henry Highland Garnet, an escaped slave and fiery abolitionist. They went on to establish the Liberty Street Presbyterian Church, so that the African American congregants would no longer be relegated to the back pews and the balcony.

As I grew up, I had reservations about the colonial system in Jamaica that exploited people and left them in very bad condition. That was something I had to confront, I never heard about the people who retreated to the hills to fight off the colonizers. Nor, anything of depth regarding Africa, so that was a part of my story that was missing.

As long as we are breathing on this earth, we have a contribution to make.

To make a connection between people from different walks of life, from different parts of the world. It’s very important in our lives. My children have all been working around important issues of education and change. One of my daughters went down to Ghana, and stayed with a family there, and that family has become very close to us. They’ve come here for weddings, and we’ve gone there for visits because I want to know the culture, I want to understand the political system, Life is all about people working together, living together, and trying to effect change. That’s what my life has been about and I continue to try to do that.

What’s my motto? God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change; courage to change the things I can; and wisdom to know the difference.