

Three mothers, three preachers, three transformative sons



Highland Views
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Guest columnist

Louise Little, Alberta King, Berdis Baldwin. Three strong Black women, each married to a preacher; each the mother of a man who preached ... and changed history. Their sons raised their voices for racial equality and fundamental human rights: Malcolm X, Martin Luther King Jr. and James Baldwin.

In her book, "The Three Mothers," Anna Malaika Tubbs writes: "Each woman was already living an incredible life that her children would one day follow. Their identities as young Black girls in Georgia, Grenada and Maryland influenced the ways in which they would approach

motherhood. Their exposure to racist and sexist violence from the moment they were born would inform the lessons they taught their children." These women were persistent and resistant to those who would keep them down, in their "place," as women, as Black women.

"They found ways to give life and to humanize themselves, their children, and in turn, our entire community. As history tells us, all of their sons did indeed make a difference in this world, but they did so at a cost. In all three cases, the mothers' worst fears became reality: each woman was alive to bury her son." Many Black mothers, and grandmothers, still do.

Anna Tubbs refers to the analogy of a crooked room (borrowed from Melissa Harris-Perry). In an experiment, people sat in a crooked chair in a crooked room and when asked to sit up straight, they

still leaned over, feeling they were sitting straight when aligned with other objects in the room. A connection is made to the pressure on Black women to conform to the alignment of society's expectations—they "find it hard to stand up straight in a crooked room." As Tubbs makes the connection to Louise, Alberta and Berdis, the crooked rooms changed during their lives as they got out of their chairs, stood tall, and rearranged rooms, helping straighten them for others. Such a useful image for the many ways communities, including religious communities, pressure people to conform, to "sit up straight" and accept the tilted worldview they are presented. Given that each of these mothers married a preacher whose flaws or fragility proved harmful to the family, it's remarkable to see the leadership emerge—strong males who found deep strength in their mothers who passed on their

upright and righteous gifts.

One description of Louise Little's parenting style and the way it helped shape Malcolm's outlook is remarkable. Reading and writing were high expectations—a dictionary was always near at hand—but so was an eclectic exposure to diverse religious beliefs: "She didn't subscribe to one particular religion but instead wanted to expose her children to several different faiths. She took her children everywhere: they attended Catholic mass, congregated with Baptists, and learned from Hindus." As someone committed to education, Louise made sure when they came home from these religious gatherings they would talk about what they learned and ask questions. She would tell them: "You take what you see will fit you, and the rest of it, just leave it there."

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In her mind it was more important to have a relationship with the Creator than to be confused by so many traditions, to get "hung up in these religions." The year before his assassination in 1965, Malcolm made the Hajj, the journey to Mecca. His experience was shaped by his Muslim faith, and by his mother's early lessons that taught him people of many colors and religions can be brothers and sisters.

While Martin was in seminary he

wrote to his mother: "I often tell the boys around campus I have the best mother in the world." Alberta King's strength and guidance deeply influenced Martin and her voice can be heard in his sense of ministry: "Any religion that professes concern for the souls of men and is not equally concerned about the slums that damn them, the economic conditions that strangle them, and the social conditions that cripple them is a spiritually moribund religion only waiting for the day to be buried."

Berdis Baldwin was consistently encouraging and supportive of her son

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Jimmy. In his life and writing he wanted people to know his mother deserved credit and “that everyone would gain more knowledge if Berdis were asked to share her wisdom after all she’d witnessed.” At her son’s memorial in 1987, the sanctuary at St. John the Divine in New York City was filled with her cries. As with each of these influential mothers, the cord of connection was powerful.

Near the conclusion of her book on the three mothers, Anna Tubbs writes: “They did not write books ... they cared more about passing on their lessons.” Now, we read the books of their sons, and hear the heartbeat of their courageous mothers.

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