

I will not fear

MY STORY *of a* LIFETIME
OF BUILDING FAITH UNDER FIRE



MELBA PATTILLO BEALS


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Some names and details have been changed to protect the privacy of the individuals involved.

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To Grandmother, India Annette Peyton,
and Mother, Dr. Lois Maria Pattillo,
who blessed me with the belief in a living God

To my brother, Conrad Pattillo,
who demonstrated by a lifetime of police work his
contribution to social advances, commitment to God,
and honoring right over wrong and good over bad

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Foreword

I Will Not Fear is one of the most inspiring books we have ever read. Dr. Beals's writing is honest and compelling, and it is the kind of book you cannot put down. It should be required reading for every American. She brings to life every story and milestone on her journey in such a way that we cannot help but take it with her. Our deepest gratitude to her for sharing her terrorizing walk so that we have a window into what it means and what it takes to be "a profile in courage."

Melba was blessed with an amazing grandmother, India, who through courageous determination in harrowing circumstances sought medical help for Melba and her mother at her birth. She instilled in Melba, during her first fifteen years of life, that her purpose here on earth was to fulfill God's assignment for her, wherever that would lead her. It has often been said that if a child has just one person who has faith in them, they have a far greater chance of not only surviving but also thriving, regardless of their life circumstances. Melba's grandmother not only had faith in her but also passed on the

gift of faith that would guide and sustain her the remaining decades of her life, particularly after Grandmother India's passing. She gave her some of the greatest gifts one could give, including the lifetime gift of the certainty of God's undying love for her and the precious gift of having God as her friend. She opened Melba's terrified young heart to the concepts of gratitude and, ultimately, forgiveness—two of the most important aspects of being a free human being. Her grandmother also instilled in her the belief that God is with her always—and would be through life—to help and guide her through any challenge she would face.

As one of the famous Little Rock Nine who first integrated the all-white Central High School in Little Rock, Arkansas, Melba was not only, quite literally, on the forefront of the desegregation movement in America but on the front pages of the major newspapers as well. She bravely entered the school, guarded by soldiers of the 101st Airborne Division and confronted with raging, violent, white citizens. This would become the testing ground of her faith. Physical and psychological threats, severe bullying, hatred, and bigotry surrounded her on all sides each day, fueled by the Ku Klux Klan's very real, life-threatening influence. And she was only fifteen years old.

There was, and is to this day, a spiritual strength that allowed Melba to return to school each day in an environment filled with dread. The jeering by whites was so vicious and volatile that each moment held the threat of both psychological and physical harm—even death.

God's plan for Melba also included healing her own terror of and prejudice against white people, so as to inspire others to do the same. God gave her the McCabe family, Quakers

FOREWORD

living in rural Santa Rosa, California. Bless that family's dear hearts, each and every one of them. They helped to heal not only a traumatized girl but also a divided nation.

We have known Melba for many decades and have shared each other's journeys. She has an amazing charisma and is filled with power, kindness, gentleness, humor, and love. Over the years, multiple back surgeries created physical challenges. But regardless of life's many obstacles, Melba has a way of bouncing back and moving forward. She is a wonderful reminder to us all that most of life's limitations live in our minds and that, with God, all things are possible because our true identity is found in Christ.

Dr. Melba Pattillo Beals's internal journey in life is as extraordinary as her external one. She inspires us all to be true to our own path, an assignment from God that we never fulfill alone.

Gerald Jampolsky, MD, founder of Attitudinal Healing and author of many books, including the international bestseller *Love Is Letting Go of Fear*

Diane Cirincione-Jampolsky, PhD, founder of Attitudinal Healing International

Acknowledgments

To my daughter, Dr. Kellie Beals, whose birth compelled me to grow up and to carve a decent life path, and to my sons, Matt and Evan Pattillo, who arrived in my life at my middle age and thereby refreshed my reasons for living and compelled me to expand rather than contract.

To Bret Baughman, who uses his machete sharpened with charm and grace to clear the way for me to find a home against the odds.

To George Buquich, an angel endowed with caregiving skills and rare early knowledge of the practice of being a son.

To Judie Fouchaux, my executive assistant, whose unending faith and positive energy keep me afloat when I have no other boat.

To Pauline and Richard France, whose prayers and consistent visits with Chinese food and table settings in hand kept me connected to the life I'd left due to my surgery and to which I wanted to return.

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To Dr. Jann Garcia, who reached out to recruit me as her mom and instead ended up helping to parent me.

To Charles Gardiner, my daughter's partner, my son in love, who listens to me with patience and advises me with love and is never judgmental.

To all the members of the Little Rock Nine: Ernest Green, the late Jefferson Thomas, Gloria Ray Karlmark, Elizabeth Eckford, Thelma Mothershed Wair, Terrence Roberts, Minnie-jean Brown, and especially Carlotta Walls Lanier, who stood by me through my journey back to the past.

To my adoptive parents, George and Carol McCabe, and my adopted sisters and brother, Judy, Joan, Dori, and Rick, who taught me that equality is an inside job, the result of my willingness to claim it.

To Carol Normandy, a light along life's path for me and a benevolent angel to fuel my spiritual progress.

To the Pugh family, Herman, Esther, and their daughters, Vicki and DeeDee, who over the last twelve years have forged a family connection that brought me love and my only grandbabies to date.

Introduction

Grandma India always said that all human beings need something bigger and more powerful than themselves to believe in. It is best when we choose God, a specific and certain choice, whom we can trust to be our life companion. “If you have faith the size of a mustard seed, you know you are always safe. Even when you find yourself falling off the highest mountain, don’t panic! Take stock to see what you can do to help yourself. If the answer is nothing, relax and enjoy the scenery, knowing that no matter how great the danger appears, you are safe in God’s arms.”

Growing up in the 1940s and ’50s in Little Rock, Arkansas, I needed a powerful God and every drop of faith I could muster and sustain to hope that one day I would be free of the imprisoning bars of segregation. I longed to be free to go to the school of my choice, to sit in the front of the bus, to drink from the nearest water fountains not marked colored, to ride on the city park merry-go-round, and to walk the sidewalks downtown without being called ugly names. I

longed to touch merchandise in stores without fearing someone would cut my hand off.

Grandma India said faith is the consistent trust that God is all powerful and always on your side if you need help. Throughout her life, she was a member of the Methodist church where I was baptized as a baby. She insisted that I remain respectful of all people and their methods of worshipping their God as I cling to my commitment to my God and Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

It would be my task to remain loyal to God, obeying His laws for living. “Taking time to study the Bible and obey your God will be crucial to your success,” she said. “The warrior is the active part of you that helps you make things happen. God is always the energy of your warrior. He is as close as your skin, and you have only to call on Him for help.”

By age three, I had memorized the Lord’s Prayer and the 23rd Psalm, which she repeated to me every night as she tucked me into bed. There were several hymns and tons of Bible verses to memorize that specified the behavior God expected from me.

I regularly had personal talks with God because Grandmother promised I would be heard. When things went wrong, He would be with me, like when I found out my father might be leaving the family because he and Mom were not getting along. I decided that for me God would be an even bigger Dad, because I needed a dad to be with me always.

I went into the backyard and sat on the ground, leaning on the trunk of the big tree and holding on to my Raggedy Ann doll. I spoke to God, trying to hear what He would say to explain the word *divorce*. Who would protect us on those dark nights when the Klan rode in their white sheets,

flashing their crosses and rifles and setting houses on fire? It would be okay, I heard God promise through my whimpers. It would be okay—He would keep me safe because He was God, my super strong Father, bigger and stronger than any Klan, more powerful than my human dad could be.

From the earliest age, I remember Grandma sticking individual pictures of my brother, mother, and me on our family refrigerator. She said they were there to demonstrate how much she loved us, how beautiful I was, and how handsome Brother was. Posted that way, she could look at us at all times of the day and appreciate how much we resembled God’s heavenly angels, she said. Above all else, she declared, “God loves you. He has your pictures on His refrigerator just as I do.”

One day when I was sad and crying over being called a nigger in the grocery store, Grandma said, “God loves you. He knows how beautiful you are. Don’t crinkle that pretty little face. God doesn’t know the word *nigger*, and He will be disappointed if you give in to it.”

To this day, whenever I feel inconsolably sad, I remember that statement—God loves me so much that He has my picture on His refrigerator. I know I am beautiful because God thinks I am.

Without any doubt, my life experiences have taught me that Grandmother was correct. Indeed, I have learned that God is with me at all times. He has demonstrated over and over His love for me. If I am willing to believe in God, I can build a relationship with Him—one that includes faith, trust, and hope—that serves me when I most need it. I am never alone, never without the powerful resources He provides.

One

AN ANGEL WITH A BROOM

December days in Little Rock, Arkansas, are filled with a foggy ground chill that bites the bones, no matter how many coats and hats one wears. On December 1, 1941, my grandmother, India Peyton, was midway on a twelve-block walk to downtown in order to see a supervisor at Missouri Pacific Hospital. She was seeking permission for my mother to be given space in the maternity section because Mother Lois was about to give birth to me. Grandma worried that the bulge of my weight in her daughter's stomach far outweighed her capacity to birth me.

“White folks don't take kindly to the notion that one of us might be in their hospital. But because Daddy Howell was a worker there, there was some hope we could get your mother in. Your mother's belly was stretched bigger than God planned it to be,” Grandma would later tell me.

Mother Lois was five feet four and weighed ninety-three pounds. Doctors estimated that I could weigh at least nine pounds. Grandmother had already been told that she would

not be allowed to bring her daughter to the hospital, no matter the risk.

The previous morning, Grandmother India had been turned down again by the clerk. She requested to see a higher-ranking supervisor to plead for entry for Mom. Now a little more than halfway there, walking as fast as she could, she wondered whether she would ever get there. The fierce wind bit her legs and seared her cheeks. She felt as though it would knock her down. If she could have made the trip a little later, she could have ridden the bus. But at 5:30 in the morning, no buses were running. She could not risk being even a moment late for her 7:00 a.m. job as a maid at the hotel.

Protecting her face with her gloved hands, she tried hard to see what was in front of her. Grandmother decided that the only way she was going to complete her trip was to pray aloud the familiar Lord's Prayer. Upon arrival at the back door, the entry assigned to people of color, she wondered whether she had the strength to swing the heavy double doors with the strong wind blowing. Just then the door swung open for her, and Mr. Jeffers, the janitor, reached his hand out to her and pulled her inside to the warmth.

"Miss India, what on earth is a body doing out here in all this freezing weather?"

Taking off her glasses to clear the fog, she asked Mr. Jeffers to point her to Mr. Van Albor's office.

"Ohhh, Miss India, why you looking for him? He ain't gonna see nobody like us."

"I need to get doctoring for my baby. She's with child, and I want her to come here because the baby is really big. That baby weighs too much for her little body to carry."

“Oh Lord, you know they ain’t gonna let that happen. The saying here is, if you let one in, they’ll all think they’re entitled to be here.”

“I got no choice, Mr. Jeffers. I gotta save my baby’s life.”

She turned and walked toward the elevator, following his directions. On the third floor, there stood the huge wooden door that led to the hospital supervisor’s office.

“I need Your help, dear Lord.” She hesitated a moment to whisper her prayer before she knocked for permission to enter.

“Good morning, Aintee. I understand you want me to do the impossible.”

“No, sir. I want you to please help me save my daughter’s life. My son-in-law, Howell Pattillo, is a good man and is one of your workers here. He is a Hostler’s helper on the Missouri Pacific Railroad.”

“You’re not asking for special treatment, are you? You know very well that Negras aren’t coddled here.”

Grandma winced because he used the familiar word *Negra*, which racist white folks called a compromise—a combination between nigger and Negro. She grasped control of herself as she squeezed her feeling tight in her throat. She could ill afford to offend him at this point.

“No, sir, of course not.”

“The answer is no, Aintee. Why are you wasting my time?”

Grandma says her heart sank as she moved toward the door, and then she remembered what her pastor had instructed.

“Bishop Riley said I should ask because it is so important to save my daughter’s life. She’s a schoolteacher and a Christian. We and Bishop Riley would be grateful.”

Grandmother’s pastor had advised that the only possible way to get her daughter into the hospital was if Bishop Riley

supported her. He was the only African American in our community who held sway over some members of the white community. Nobody seemed to know why, but everybody in our community knew it was just so.

“Aintee, now you know that there’s no way I can give you a regular room. I’ll allow her to stay here in a storage room. We have an empty room. So it’s yours while it’s empty. She needs to have that baby before a week passes. Do you hear me? A week.”

“Oh, thank you, sir, thank you. I will report your kindness to the bishop.”

“Hold on, Aintee. Don’t get any ideas about inviting your relatives and friends to celebrate. Only you, the father, and the mother can come in that back door, and be quiet. Nobody needs to know you all are here.”

“Yes, sir.”

“And there will be no birth certificate saying that baby was born here. I don’t want a parade of Negras marching here stinking up the place.”

“Of course, sir.”

Backing out of the office, curtsying with her hands in a praying position, Grandmother was very grateful.

On Saturday afternoon, December 6, Mother Lois began harsh, prolonged contractions and spurts of pain that overcame her. Papa dropped her and Grandma off just outside the hospital back door. Mother was in a small, windowless but clean room. She began what would become a long night and next day filled with drama and pain with Grandmother at her side. The room Mother occupied was down an isolated hallway. When Grandmother asked for pain medication, the nurse said, “Give you niggers an inch and you take a mile.”

Early the next morning, Mother was wrenched with pain and covered with perspiration. Grandmother feared that nurses and doctors would ignore her. She telephoned Dr. Routen, a white doctor who had been our family doctor for several years. He came to the hospital and summoned another physician to give Mother medicine and take her to the delivery room.

Meanwhile, Dad discovered a radio down the hall and was busy going back and forth between the two rooms as he announced, “Pearl Harbor has been attacked.”

December 7, 1941, was a traumatic day that looms in this country’s history! Bombs were bursting in air as Pearl Harbor was shattered. Hearing announcements of this tragic event was secondary in Mother’s life as she prepared to give birth to her first child.

Grandmother prayed and read Bible verses as Father meandered back and forth with news of Pearl Harbor. They anticipated a difficult birth. It lasted thirty hours. Mother Lois was petite—while Father was six feet four and two hundred pounds. As time grew near, Grandmother reported that there were signs of trouble. Dad was not called, as men were not allowed in the delivery room.

When the birth process grew ever more difficult, the doctor decided to use forceps, though admitting this practice could lead to infection. I weighed nine pounds, eight ounces.

After the birth was complete, Mom and I were taken to the storage room. On the way out, Grandma remembered seeing Mr. Jeffers cleaning the birth room.

By my first evening on earth, December 7, it was evident that my head was swelling, and I could not keep my tiny hands from scratching. Grandma said I cried all night long, but

even though she pled with the nurse, no one would come to address my problem. By Monday, my temperature had soared to 103 degrees. My hot, swollen head was an open, bleeding wound, which alarmed Mother, Grandmother, and Father.

By Tuesday, December 9, my temperature was 105. The doctor announced that the infection was spreading, and I probably would not make it. He operated on my head and inserted irrigating tubes.

The next day, just outside Mother's door, Mr. Jeffers was sweeping the floor. When he heard Grandmother praying aloud as Mother cried softly, he stepped inside the door and expressed his concern. "I guess washing her head with that there Epsom salts did not work," he lamented.

"What Epsom salts?" Grandmother asked.

"The doctor told the nurse the baby's head needs rinsing every two hours or so with Epsom salts."

"No," Grandmother said, "the baby's been here with us, and the nurse has not come to rinse her head."

Racing down the hallway, Grandma got ahold of the nurse. "We do not coddle niggers here," the red-haired nurse shouted. "Understand I don't have time for you or your baby. You don't belong here!"

Grandmother grabbed her purse and left for the store to purchase Epsom salts. Only by the grace of God and an angel carrying a broom did I live. Three days later, we left the hospital.

As a child growing up, I always fretted about the bald strip that ran from the top of my misshapen head down to the right ear. I was so afraid that one of my friends would say something. Grandmother always quieted my fretting—explaining that it was proof of how special I was in God's

eyes because He had saved my life against all odds. “God has been kind to give you beautiful hair like shiny black satin to cover your scar. No one will know,” she said. “God has rescued you from death because He has special assignments for you. You will get word of the tasks you are to perform when He deems you ready for His work.”

That special assignment came fifteen years later in September of 1957, when I was chosen as one of the Little Rock Nine—nine African American children selected by the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) to integrate Central High School in Little Rock, Arkansas, amid a firestorm of angry mobs determined to keep us out.

It was not until fifty years later that I learned the enormity of the blessing I was granted. A cranial specialist was to examine my head because I had felt some discomfort after I accidentally caught my head when closing the car trunk. As the nurse entered the room to gather preliminary information, I greeted her. She examined my head and began talking loudly and slowly to me as though I was hard of hearing and mentally disabled.

“What day is it?” she shouted, leaning in close, staring at me.

“Tuesday,” I said, curious about her behavior.

“Who is president?” she screeched.

“President Clinton, William Jefferson Clinton,” I repeated.

At first, I cooperated with her line of questions, but then I screamed, “Lady, I am a professor with a doctoral degree. How can I help you?”

That is when, with an astonished expression, she explained to me that with my misshapen head and the nature of the

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injury, I could have suffered cerebral palsy or another severe brain injury. The doctor said I was a walking miracle. I whispered, “Thank You, God,” all the way back to the car.

What I know for sure is that we have a God who guides and protects us. God is always available when we call for help and even when we are unable or unwilling to call. He intervenes to rescue us, even when we don't know we need help.