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The Quality of Cool  
For Paula Aniece Anderson

When I think of Paula, I think of the quality of cool.

By cool, I am not speaking of the approbation we give to things that are new, exciting, or current. I am not talking about the latest fashion. I am talking about the concept of cool within traditional African religion and philosophy. In this context heat and cool are opposites. Heat is the upset of equilibrium. It is the cause of disharmony and dysphoria, an unease and general dissatisfaction with life. In contrast, coolness restores coherence and equilibrium. It is not angry or spiteful or petty. It seeks to create harmony between the individual and the world around them, especially within community and family.

Coolness is a gentleness of character and generosity. It is discreet. It is grace under pressure. It is the confidence and the ability to cope with the ebb and flow of life, with the good and the bad, the beautiful and the ugly. When it is internalized, it becomes an aspect of character. We can therefore think of it along with other virtues such as the classical Greek virtues of courage, prudence, justice, and self-restraint. We can think of coolness within the context of the Christian virtues of faith, hope and love. We can think about it within the context of just peace virtues of truth, respect and security.

Paula was cool.

Her cool was not handed to her easily. It was hard won. Because of her scoliosis, she suffered painful operations on her back and wore back braces. But she persevered. Her challenges helped her to learn and to develop her coolness.

Cool is also created when we learn to live our authentic selves. Many people live long lives, grow old and die and never come to know who they are. They never have the courage to live beyond the dictates of the status quo. Paula

lived her truth with both the determination and the discretion to decide where and when and how to reveal the various aspects of her person.

She was not flawless and neither was her cool.

However, cool-- the truth of cool, the calm of cool, the humility of cool, the confessions of cool, the gratitude of cool, the forgiveness of cool-- is necessary before we can come before the ancestors, and I say, within a Christian context, before we can come before God with our petitions. The Bible teaches us that if we regard iniquity in our hearts, that God will not hear our prayers. (Psalm 66:18) This brings us back to the function of cool as a restoration of equilibrium.

At the 2012 family reunion, Paula agreed to do the libation ceremony where we honored the ancestors, those who have come and gone before us. Her cool gave her the sight to see the importance of remembrance.

However, she not only was one to remember the ancestors, she wanted us to understand the importance of the elders and the necessity of passing the torch from one generation to the next. At the 2010 family reunion, she organized a ritual whereby a new generation would take responsibility for maintaining the family ties. She knew that it was time for the next generation to step up and to be the stabilizing force for a family that no longer lives in close geographic proximity. She wanted us as a family to maintain equilibrium. She did not do Facebook, but she was one to communicate with family and friends. She stayed in touch. She would call my dad from time to time when it was not his birthday or father's day just to say hello. We all had a whisper of a warning that something was amiss when she stopped communicating.

In the end, she sheltered the extended family from her dying. Perhaps she knew how much her leaving would hurt.

We are a close knit family. The generations before us gave us this gift. At the same time, it is a gift that can cause us all great pain. Because when one of us dies, the fabric of family is torn in such a way that a part of our own souls is frayed. The loose ends hurt with the pain of exposed nerve endings, and our tears have a will of their own.

But the good news is that because we are a close knit family, we comfort one another. We come together to hold each other up. We remember the good

Paula times. But, more than that, we help each other to understand that as a people of faith, we know that she is not dead. Her spirit, life-force, energy, soul has been knit into the fabric of our family on the other side of physical death. She has been gathered to our people. She has been knit into eternal time and into the infinity of God's love. She is home.

At the same time, she is part of pale blue satin daytime skies, part of the black velvet night-sky bejeweled with star light. She is a part of gossamer clouds, part of the lace of snowflakes and the refreshing rain on hot summer days. She whispers in the wind reminding us to be cool.