

*What makes love in old age so much more profound and enduring than the romantic, erotic kind that characterized our youth?*

Far out in the country one cold December day a very old black woman, wearing a red bandanna and long dark dress was walking along a path through the pinewoods. Her name was Phoenix Jackson. She had a little cane and as she made her way through the wintry Mississippi landscape she would say things like, "Out of my way all you foxes and jack rabbits. I got a long way to go." On she went, up steep hills and through thorn bushes and over a log thrown across a creek. "I wasn't as old as I thought," she said, having managed that. Then through a field of cornstalks until she reached a road. Once upon the road she stumbled into a ditch and lay there on her back like a June bug until a hunter lifted her out and said, "Granny, take my advice and stay home."

But on she went until she reached the streets of Natchez, full of perfumed Christmas shoppers. She entered a big building, climbed its staircase and entered a doctor's office. "Aunt Phoenix," said the nurse, "Is your grandson's throat any better since the last time you came?" The boy had swallowed lye some years earlier and he would not heal. "Oh my little grandson, he sit up there in the house all wrapped up, waiting by himself. We is the only two left in the world. He suffers but it don't seem to put him back at all. He got a sweet look. He going to last. I not going to forget him the whole enduring time. I could tell him from all the others in creation." The nurse gave Phoenix some medicine and a nickel as a Christmas charity. Phoenix went out and bought her grandson a paper windmill on a stick.

Eudora Welty called this story "The Worn Path". It's about love - not romantic love or cold, crisp charity but the kind of love that rises from somewhere just below your heart and compels you to go that extra mile, to be devoted to someone whom no one else in this world might even notice. And what if Phoenix Jackson's grandson is dead? Readers asked Eudora Welty that and she replied, "What if he is?" Old Phoenix would make that same journey (as pilgrimage?) again and again if only to keep alive a sense of her grandson's presence, his need, of her connectedness to what had become for her a pearl of great price. Phoenix Jackson, by way of her grandson, had developed a habit of love she could never lose.

This story says a lot to me, having had a child who was also ill, afraid of this world and therefore given to ways of escaping it, like becoming addicted to drugs in his teens. And I followed my own worn path (as parents do) back and forth to the city, up the Waldo Grade, across the Golden Gate, looking for him, finding him, losing him, tutoring him, sheltering him, enjoying him with a breakfast here, a movie there, discovering in him things that made my journey less and less a "paternal obligation" and more and more a compassionate delight.

Nor has his death ever stopped the momentum of the "Phoenix Jackson" love I feel for him. I still make the trips, visit the familiar streets to place a rose upon a doorstep or by a hotel entrance. It's something I'm driven to by an experience of awe and love that must be familiar to each of you older folk. And again, it's not romantic, it's not duty, it's not charity. It's rather a surge such as Jesus must have felt when in the Gospel it says, "He was driven by the Spirit" - an upwelling that compels us wonderfully and in the face of death itself to walk the walk of dedication and delight.

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