

My Story

TRAGEDY TURNED TO OPPORTUNITY

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by Dr. Lillie M. Coley, PhD

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Unless otherwise indicated, all scriptures quotations are taken from the King James Version of the Bible or the New International Version. The word *Church* in this book is capitalized on purpose based on teachings from seminaries.

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To God My Father, who is my Lord and Savior,
my Friend, my Companion, my Everything—who
told Me in a small still voice to go forth with this. I
stepped out on faith!

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*This book is dedicated to the late and the great James
Odell Coley, Sr., my beloved father and Lillie Charlene
Coley, my beloved Mother.
and
My family*

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Chapter 1

Experiencing Shock In Childhood

The day of the funeral was one I will never forget. Whenever God allows tragedy to strike, it is for a reason. The Lord foreknew that my father was not going to change. He also knew that my father thought he owned his family. This is what he was taught, but this was wrong.

Before the funeral, our family had many reporters and people coming to our house for our story. It really did not make any sense. People from all over the world sent us money, clothes, cards, toys, and other household items. Because our family was well known, the funeral attendance was expected to be big. Planning was so that the family

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would not suffer too much; inconvenience was the key. I remember different people taking my siblings and I to stores to get clothes and shoes for the funeral. To this day, I have no idea who they were. So many knew my mother because she helped them with their problems, and they felt indebted to her.

Often, we would be told, “You kids have nothing to be ashamed of. Your mother helped so many people.” My mother planted a lot of seeds in helping others. When you help you never know what life is going to bring to you and those around you.

When the funeral cars came to the house to get us, I felt my stomach drop, because this would be the last day I would see the apple of my eye and the first man I ever loved. Our church could hold about three thousand people in the main sanctuary and balcony. The entire downstairs was filled, and there were some people in the balcony. During the funeral, my mind was in wonderland. I could not believe that this was happening. You could not hear anything during the service because somebody was always crying. My brothers, sisters, and I were in the first row just sobbing away. This was a double funeral. My mother’s casket was right in front of us and my father’s right next to hers. This was truly the worst day of my life.

As I reflect on that day now, it seems hard to see how anything good could come out of so much pain. But somehow in God’s infinite wisdom and divine love, He turned this whole tragedy into an opportunity later in our lives. As a matter of fact, while Reverend Leon H. Sullivan was doing the eulogy, he said, “*Turn this tragedy into an opportunity.*”

Experiencing Shock In Childhood

One never knows why things happen in life. Some people get cancer, other experience teenage pregnancy, rape, or molested. As I meet people every day, it seems everybody has a story to tell about what they have gone through or what they are going through. I must say our parents' death was our tragedy. People must remember that God did not cause this to happen, but He allowed it to happen. He knows the end from the beginning. Even in something as horrible as death, God wanted to show Himself in a big way—and He did.

Emotionally none of the young children were able to make it through the funeral or to the burial. Friends of my parents took Yvette, Annette, Kurt, Michelle, and me home. My older siblings did go to the burial site to see our parents' final resting place.

Our house was packed with many people after the funeral. Some were just overly curious and wanted to see how immaculately my mother's house was kept. The house was so crowded that a table had to be used to secure the kitchen area from visitors. I could not eat a thing. I wanted my parents back and nothing else. I found that when people are going through a tragedy or crisis, others will use this as an opportunity to take advantage of the situation. Many people stole items from our house such as pots and pans and other household items. It was truly unbelievable.

No one can really imagine the impact my parents' death had on my siblings. For me I felt emotionally drained with no life or energy. This whole ordeal produced the shock of our lives. If we had witnessed our parents in an abusive relationship, it would have been easier to digest but we never saw our parents argue until the last year of their lives, and we never heard them use foul language. We did not see any of that. We only knew that one minute they were alive, and we

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were living in paradise with the golden rug under our feet, and the next minute they were gone. It appeared that someone had come along, snatched the rug from under our feet, and left us standing on bare ground. It takes years to build things and seconds to destroy it.

When dealing with shock, our family had to go through its stages and phases to ensure the proper recovery. Usually, one must first come to terms with the situation, but in our case, we understood what happened but just could not figure out why. This conservative and all-American family had no answers, just a lot of questions. All of us received counseling afterward and we had to talk about it. This, of course, helped, but it was difficult. We were forced to talk. At this point, it started to sink in, but not at first.

Although all these things were taking place, God did not say anything to me during my time in prayer with Him. It seemed like there was a holy hush; the heavens were silent. But how many of you know that just because God is not talking does not mean He is not there with you? During this time, He didn't talk. He only listened. While He was only listening, He carried me and my family in His precious arms for comfort and strength. It is truly miraculous how God kept my family together in every aspect of our lives: spiritually, financially, emotionally, and morally. Of course, all of these areas were not perfect, but for children with no parents, God definitely showed that He was in control. He allowed the tragedy to happen, but the devil was not allowed to touch any of us.

It is truly unbelievable how God kept us together. We were never separated and had no real major problems growing up. I am not bragging. I am just thankful. Some families I know with two parents have had more problems

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than I had with all my sisters and brothers combined. Of course, this is not a comparison contest, but this is a demonstration of God's sovereignty, power, and divine order over our family. "All things truly do work together for good for those who love the Lord and are called according to His purpose." (Romans 8:23, NIV)

I need to mention also that all my brothers and sisters were "saved," or Christians before my parents died. I was saved at nine years old. My mother can take credit for this; she made sure we attended Church regularly and were exposed to spiritual events and activities. From this we would have encounters with God that would lead to salvation. God designed all this. He knew we were going to need Him as a foundation in order to survive the tragedy of our parents' death. I became very active in the Church at the age of nine and this continued into my adult life.

Chapter 2

Fairy Tale Childhood

I was born into a middle-class family to James O. Coley, Sr., and Lillie C. Coley. When my parents met, my mother was a model. She had won several beauty contests, and the camera definitely loved her face, but she gave all that up to be with my father. My mother had four children from a previous marriage, and my father loved her so much that he took care of these children as if they were his own. Life was not easy for African Americans during the early sixties, but somehow things worked out just fine for us.

My mother had eight additional children from her union with my father. We moved into our new home located in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, during the mid-sixties. The

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oldest Coley from my parents' union was five years of age, and the youngest from her previous marriage was sixteen at the time so most of the children in the home with our parents were Coleys. My mother said that we moved into our family home when she was pregnant with me, and this is how she always knew how long we had been living there. We were a family blessed with food, clothing, and other luxuries at a time when our country was considered economically depressed.

During my early childhood, my father, a Marine, would often be gone for months. He wrote often and sent big boxes of candy, and we could hardly wait to hear from him. Since my father didn't want to move us around the country during his civil service, we stayed in Philadelphia. My mother, who did not have to work because Daddy was financially stable, would travel to see him wherever he was stationed.

My father would come home periodically from the military base but every time he had to leave, we would cry like babies. It was really hard to see him go because we adored him and loved the ground he walked on. When he was home, he spent quality time with us. We played games such as the horsy ride, where he would put one of us on his lap or knee, and let us ride him until we fell off. It was always fun to see which one of us would stay on the longest.

My father never seemed to tire of playing with us. He also loved giving us piggyback rides and, my favorite, putting us on his shoulders. And, no matter what the weather, he gave us ice cream cones. His favorite was Breyer's or Sealtest Butter Pecan. Daddy also would bring home gourmet cheeses from all over the world for my mother, especially during her pregnancies. So, all of us came into this world loving cheese and ice cream.

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One day my brother Odell and I asked our father if he could come home to stay like a regular dad. My father had a very soft spot for his children, and we could get him to do just about anything. He talked it over with my mother, and he retired from the military a year later. Boy, we were happy to see our daddy every day! Once my daddy came home, I could not even fall asleep at night unless he was in the house. I would be in the bed half asleep until I heard his voice, then I would fall sound asleep.

My dad would turn off all the lights before he and my mother went to bed and come and watch us sleep. One time, I could feel his presence, and I woke up. Everything was dark, so I reached out to feel for him, and there he was. I asked him about it the next day, and he told me it was not him. He denied this with a smile until the day he died, but I knew it was him.

Even after my dad retired he still worked part-time. When his shifts would change, we would not see him some mornings because he had to leave early. I said to him, "I want to see you in the morning." He said, "You're going to have to get up early to see me," so I did. I do not know how I did, but I knew exactly when to get up. I would sit on his lap, and eat breakfast with him. That time with him was so special to me. I can still remember this clearly, even today. After getting up so early, I would be tired the rest of the day, and my mother soon told me to stay in the bed and get my sleep.

Our house, as I remember, was very big and beautiful. We were the only African American family in our neighborhood. We were surrounded by neighbors who were Caucasian people of Jewish descent. Jewish people owned and operated every store. My mother was overly protective of us and kept us in the house ninety-five percent of the time. Since we were

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in the house, our father made the it our haven by providing us a play area in the basement.

In thinking back about our house, which my family still owns today, I remember that our living room had deep royal-blue carpet with a big red diamond in the middle.

The living room held a love seat, sofa, long stereo, floor-model color TV, and a fireplace. Our dining room could seat sixteen people, with other furniture against the wall. My mother's kitchen was her pride and joy. Everything had to be sky blue, her favorite color. The kitchen had a washer, a big freezer, a side-by-side refrigerator, a dishwasher, long countertops, a lazy susan, and a big table that would seat eight people.

Our backyard was also big. First our backyard had swings and sliding boards, but later our father told us he wanted to get a pool. Daddy could swim like a fish. He just loved the water, and so did I. I inherited most of his habits, although he taught all of us how to swim. Before we got the pool, Daddy took us to a clean public pool called Gustin Lake every day during the summer . I think he got tired of going to the public pool, so he bought us one and took down the swings and sliding boards. He purchased a huge above-ground pool big enough for him to swim in. During this time we got our first African American neighbor who was very jealous of my father and my family because we had more than he did. The neighbor often told my brothers, sisters, and me not to play around his house. He would say, "Go get into your pool." We had the pool several years, and all the kids on the block spent a lot of time at our house. They were either in the basement which covered the entire length of the house, shooting pool or swimming in the backyard.

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Unfortunately, someone started punching holes in the pool at night, and my father would have to patch them up. Daddy tried to keep up the pool. He sat in it late one night hoping he would catch the person responsible, but no one came. After the third or fourth act of vandalism, Daddy had to take the pool down. We all cried ourselves to sleep that night. My parents considered moving because we were starting to get more African Americans in the neighborhood who did not want to see others with more than they had. Today, we call this jealousy. I learned early about this type of spirit or behavior and from where the saying “pulling each other down like crabs in a barrel” came.

The basement was where we socialized. On one side my father put a pool table, a ping-pong table, and pinball machine. He also built a bathroom for my siblings and me. On the other side, which was considered the girls’ side, we had our kitchen set and other items needed to play house. Often, my sisters and I had our daddy come down to have tea and cake. It was funny to see him try to sit in those little chairs. He was a big man, and he had to kneel on the floor to play house with us. After he got up, he would say, “My knees hurt.”

The upstairs of our home had four bedrooms, three of which were very large. My sister Shirl and I had the back room, which had a full-size, beautiful white canopy bed that our father bought with all the dressers and mirrors to match. We *loved* our room.

Our brothers, unfortunately, loved the bed, too, and they kept jumping on the canopy top until it finally collapsed. When my mother became pregnant with my sister Michelle, who was the absolute last child, Shirl and I moved to the smaller room. This time our daddy bought us a daybed, and

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we just loved it, too. Everything about us was big: big family, big house, big car, big meals, and even our thinking was big. Mother always taught her children to think exceedingly and abundantly. She would sometimes say, “Is anything too hard for God? ”and we would say, “No, nothing is too hard for God.” This became our pattern of thought, and this method became a way of life for our family.

Our home was burglarized by one of the neighbors around the time our pool was destroyed. We were the only family who had a floor-model color TV, an RCA to be exact. My father had also bought us the first TV game called TV Tennis. When our house was robbed, the only thing that was taken was the TV. My father had left a leather jacket on a chair, and there was a radio on the dining room table. The burglar did not want anything else. With all the people in the neighborhood, everyone claimed they saw nothing. Little did they know that my mother had a lot of power in the city, and my parents found out who probably did it. No arrest was ever made due to the lack of evidence. The suspected thief kept the TV in his garage for years because he feared using or selling it since we were the only family with that model. My brother Edward actually saw our property in his garage years later. My father went out the very next day and purchased another color, floor-model TV, and he replaced our wooden front door which was destroyed during the burglary with a white steel one.

After this incident, my brothers, sisters, and I learned a valuable lesson about life and material possessions. It was really hard for some people to survive during those times, but stealing was not the answer to their problem. My mother knew some people who barely had a chair to sit on. She also knew she was fortunate, but until our house was robbed, my

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brothers, sisters, and I thought everybody lived the way we did.

My father loved family activities, one of which was taking car rides to South Philly to see the planes take off and land. During this time, there was a lot of open space on the side of the road, so we could see the airplane traffic. Every time we crossed the South Philly bridge where the huge oil tanks were, my sister Shirl would get sick from the fumes. We had a challenge of rolling the windows up to keep her from getting sick and still allowing her to see the planes take off and land. We all enjoyed one another within our family circle.

Growing up was a lot of fun. My family had just about everything money could buy and the perfect family setting, but, most of all, we had love from both our parents. We did everything together as a family such as eating, taking walks, and going to the library. In this type of atmosphere, we created a bond that nothing could break, not even death.

My father gave us a good home that was beautiful and immaculate. My mother raised all her children to be clean, to appreciate what we had, and to be mannerable. Mom was very strict, even before Dad came home permanently. We had to go to the library almost every day and read for two hours before we came home. Then it would be homework and dinner. My mother did let us watch some television, but not much. We rarely saw anything on TV after nine, because we were in bed or getting ready for school the next day. We loved the ground my mother walked on. She was a true educator and a very beautiful woman.

It is important for me describe in detail what we had because you cannot miss what you never had. Understanding how we were raised will help you to better understand this

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book. I think I was between seven and ten years old when most of these events took place. God helped me to remember everything as if it were yesterday. He preserved my memories because He knew that this was all I was going to have, and I would need this information to write this book.



Lillie C. Coley

Chapter 3

The Apple of My Eye and Heart: My Mother

As you can see from my mother's picture, she was immaculate. I am not saying this because she was my mommie, but my mother was drop-dead gorgeous. She was extremely health conscious, even from her childhood, and this carried over to her adulthood mainly because her mother died from breast cancer, and because my mother worked as a model in the fashion industry. Her skin was flawless, and she drank water like a fish. She would stand at the sink and drink glass after glass, talking as she drank about how good it tasted. She loved water and vegetables. I think my mother must have given us every vegetable known

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to mankind. We had two vegetables, one starch, and one meat every night. My father loved meat, so his children picked up this eating habit also. My mother was always flossing her teeth, which were beautiful, and her favorite exercise was walking.

My mother won several beauty contests. She was also an educator and public speaker, but her best role was being our mother. She just loved being a mommie. I remember asking her one day while we were wrestling with my father on the floor, why she had so many children. She said, “Because I loved your father and knew he could take care of us. But, most of all, I always wanted to have a houseful of children and to be able to stay home to raise them.” And so she did.

My mother always sent us off to school and was home to receive us every day when we got home. She did not run the streets or go out to nightclubs. She was home every night with us when we went to bed. Often she would visit our schools unexpectedly. I remember one time she visited my classroom, and one the kids nudged me and said, “Your mother’s here.” I was so scared to turn around, and I wondered what I had done. Later, I found out she did this with my brothers and sisters periodically, so I learned to be on my best behavior because I never knew when I was going to see her.

My mother was the youngest of three sisters who never really had a good relationship with her father, so she enjoyed being married to my dad because he was the fatherly type. My aunts raised her because their mother died when she was only nine years old. My mother and her sisters came from Savannah, Georgia, before they moved to Philadelphia during their late teenage years.

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My mother's two sisters had smaller families. My mother breastfed all twelve of her children, and she had midwives deliver almost every one of us. We all were born healthy with all our fingers and toes. My mother did not believe in birth control but she did have an old-fashioned remedy, which she chose not to use. Her sisters did, and that's why their families were so small. I heard they used petroleum jelly. They said nothing would pass through that.

My mother taught my siblings and me important values and that we must believe in ourselves. If there's one thing that she did, it was to teach us that we were s-o-m-e-b-o-d-y. None of my brothers and sisters grew up with low self-esteem. For the most part, each of us felt special and loved. She never let us walk around with our heads down. We were not allowed to look at the ground while walking. Everytime I looked down, she would tap my chin, and say, "Put your head up." After getting your chin tapped and biting your lip, you learned to hold your head up high, but not too high. She taught us to have confidence, not cockiness.

My mother believed not just in being an example, but in setting one. So often in my adult life I have heard people say, "The only example I am going to follow is Jesus," and I think He is a good one to follow but He is sitting on the right hand side of God so the way we live is the best way to represent Jesus, because others are watching. We are the only Bible some people will ever read. People come to Church looking for Jesus, but when they get there, they only find us Christians. So, how we live is, by far, the best teacher.

Often, as my mother was building our character, she used creative ways that I have never forgotten. For instance, when she would bathe us, she would tell us how precious our bodies were and how it was the only thing that we had, so we

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should take r-e-a-l good care of it. She would say things like, “Don’t let nobody touch you in places that are not comfortable to you.” These words were lodged within my heart and have helped me become the woman I am today. I know that my body is the most precious thing that I have, and it belongs to *God and me*.

My mother could cook extremely well. We were spoiled. She prepared everything from scratch, and there was a lot of love in her cooking. My father could cook, too, and between the two of them, I do not know who was better. I think my father taught my mother a lot. Mother was a housewife for most of her marriage until she became involved with the community. She became an overnight wonder in politics by providing leadership. I thought my mother was every man’s dream. She was beautiful, she could speak extremely well, she had confidence, she was an educator, she believed in and loved people, and she knew how to empower others so they would help themselves. She had us cleaning other people’s alleys and streets as part of her political experience.

Our family was my mother’s main campaign helpers. My mother ran for committee woman and won. She strongly believed in not giving people a fish but teaching them how to fish. She was the first person I heard use this analogy when I was a young child in the early seventies. That’s why she had us cleaning other people’s property—to give them the incentive to help themselves. My mother helped many people get jobs and released from jail. As the neighborhood captain and committee woman, she became very well known for helping people. Many frequently called her for assistance with their problems.

My mother basically had a serving spirit. Between my father’s duty in the military and my mother’s in the

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community, this spirit spilled over to me. I also have a passion to serve and empower others. My mother just loved people and they loved her. When she talked, others listened. She had the ability to make others feel good about themselves, so everybody was crazy about her.

We had the home everybody wanted to visit and nobody wanted to leave. Sometimes my brothers had to ask visitors if we could go to sleep because it seemed like they were not planning to leave. I have found that people love to be in an atmosphere where their spirit is free.

During the latter part of my mother's life, she still had a strong desire to do other things such as community service. After having so many children, believe it or not, she still had a lot of energy. But, as I mentioned, she had a serving spirit, and these kind of people are not satisfied unless they are helping others. My father did not mind my mother doing community service, as long as it did not take her out of the house for long periods. She started to with sell Amway products when the company first started, and she also sold Tupperware. These two products along with her politics were very successful for her. She really loved selling and using Amway products. Today this company is called Quixtar.

My mother would visit our schools on a semi-routine basis. The teachers and principals all knew her. One day at the school, she saw workers throwing out the excess lunches for the day. She asked, "Why they were throwing out food when there are so many people who are hungry?" The workers told her they had to because it was part of school regulations. My mother then went to the school board of Philadelphia and asked for the food. I do not know what she said, or to whom she said it, but the people at the school board

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fell in love with her, and her wish was their command. They told her she could take the food to the needy families. They subsequently offered her a job within the school system. My father was not really happy about this because he was accustomed to my mother being barefoot and pregnant but he knew those days were over. He agreed to let her work part-time only. My mother started working for the school board and at my school as a teacher's aide, and she just loved it. When we got older, or should I say, when the youngest child, my sister Michelle started school, my mother's career took off. My mother's encounter with the school board officials and the community went to another level. And yes, she still kept her daily task of taking food from the school to give to needy families.

After helping so many people in the community with jobs, food, traffic tickets, clothing, and being released from jail, she became one of the most powerful women in Philadelphia. My mother was now a success, and some described her as an overnight wonder. Before she knew it, the mayor and other city officials were coming to her for help with minority votes. People who wanted to run for office would come to my mother first, so she would endorse them. If they were credible and were really going to help African Americans and poor people, she would do it. Everyone she backed won. She put many Philadelphia officials in office, and some are still there today.

Often, my mother would call us at home in the middle of the week and say, "Put on your Church clothes. Your daddy is coming to get you." She meant all eight of us Coleys who were living in the family home. We were going to the "victory" parties of the political officials. At the time, we had no idea what was going on. We only knew that the hotel banquet rooms were very beautiful, especially the table

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settings. Many political people would come over to our table and say they had never seen such a large group of children who were so well-mannered. My parents always got compliments like that about us. We carried our last name well, even today, thank you Jesus! My mother always had my daddy right there and made sure it was clear to everyone who he was. I never, in all the days of my life with my parents, heard my mother say anything negative about my daddy. *Never!!!*

Although, my mother was very successful politically with helping people vote and register to vote along with other community support, this was not her first encounter with helping people. While we were young, my mother was asked by our pastor, Reverend Leon H. Sullivan of Zion Baptist Church to help him lead the Tasty Kake march in the early sixties. Tasty Kake, one of the oldest snack food factories in the United States was based in Philadelphia, was not hiring African Americans during that time. This march turned out to be a success, and it helped many African-Americans to obtain jobs. It also paved the way for people today in other aspects of employment in terms of helping them stand up for equality.

My mother did several things like this, but not too many, because her family always, always came first. I am so proud to know how she has helped so many people make it in life.

I am so very proud to have my mother's name, because she truly left me a legacy. I am even more fortunate to have my parental grandmother's first name as my middle name on my father's side. So, my mother's name was Lillie Charlene Coley and my name is Lillie Marie Coley. But, more importantly, I am glad I have my father's last name. I am a true Coley.

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I am happy that my mother was the first woman I ever knew during my childhood. Being the first real female image in my life, she set the pace, or tone, for me as I grew older. This is why it is so important that she lived this thing called life the very best she could. This was imperative because all of her children were watching every move she made. I looked up to her because I knew one day I would be like her, or at least that's what I thought as a child. Fortunately, I became a lot like her. I am so glad she set such a beautiful example for me to follow. It is hard to tell somebody to live something that you are not living yourself.

Now, we know everybody makes mistakes and falls short, but we must learn to get over that. I want to know: are you trying to live this thing called life right, or, are you just pretending?