To Honor Life, or ’Happy Birthday, Dammit!’

May 8, 2012 By Lora René Tucker

Even on my birthday, I am given signposts as gifts. So I want to honor my mentor, a fellow Taurean, who was a teacher, who is now a guidepost on my trek, that comes one birthday at a time. HAPPY BIRTHDAY TO ME, dammit!

On March 3, 2012, while we watched the political circus called the Republican presidential nomination race play out on television; just before the country faced the fury of the shooting of a black teenager, Trayvon Martin, in Stanford, Florida; Louis Reyes Rivera, “The Janitor of History,” an internationally renowned poet, historian, and activist; transitioned from this turbulent earth. An unsung hero; he was an intricate part of New York’s algorithm, from Harlem to Bedford Stuyvesant and beyond. Louis Reyes Rivera was a part of the student uprising that shook City College in the late 1960s, and had been a professor, editor, and advocate; a voice and a bridge in the Black and Latino communities. He walked the streets of “Bed-Stuy” and Harlem with pride and a reverent familiarity; whoever he encountered or whoever recognized him in the street would be acknowledged minimally but gracefully. I had the blessing of knowing him, though briefly, and had the permission to call him my mentor.

I remember being at the Harlem Book Fair this past summer when there was a tribute to him at the Thurgood Marshall Academy on West 135th Street. The event was full with people from all different walks of life - the noteworthy and the note-taking - with a lineage of writers who he had taught, cultivated, or just listened to. All came to either pay homage or to witness this man being honored. At one time, there was a lot of “energy” in the room and Louis just quietly sat where he was instructed to sit, took in what he was supposed to take in, and moved to the side and gave way to any other energy but the good vibes of the moment. He walked with the assurance that comes with standing your ground through spiritual and political cyclones, ego tsunamis, and cultural combat. He was on his turf with his people that day and everything was going to be okay. He was a neighborhood poet with international reach. He was local and accessible but global and historical.

From the Saturday workshops to his performances around New York City, I studied the man, or better yet, marveled - what amazing details he shared; how he approached the written word, how he performed, moved, and listened. And he was honest. Most of the time kind, sometimes not, but honest. I was a student of the poet/historian/activist, in total and in training. And he accepted me and validated me as a writer. He encouraged my growth; critiquing my every writing, right down to

my emails. And he kept reminding me to stay honest. In the past year and a half, Louis edited my poetry book so I could publish it under his tutelage. And it will be. He was even so generous to even review my first two entries in Poz. In the review of my first entry, “Those Little Signposts,” in his closing to me, he said:

“You stay well and keep being honest. Later, Louis.”

(I received the email on February 14, 2012, the last personal email I received from Mr. Louis Reyes Rivera. Little did I know that his transition would become one of my signpost; now a guidepost as I continue in my journey.)

When March 3rd came, I was just waking up, cleaning the cobwebs out of my head, and getting myself ready for Louis’ Saturday workshop when I received a call from a fellow workshop participant:

“The workshop has been canceled…”

The air was sucked out of me like I was hit by a F5 tornado, my limbs felt as if I was being pulled and turned inside out. What was I going to do now? Who could I turn to? It was like my favorite teacher had been transferred in the middle of the semester (and some.) There was so much unfinished business. (Or was there?) So what did I do to mourn the loss of my teacher/mentor? I got on the “A” train to the Cloisters, and walked up the steep slope stairs, strolled along the paths, sit on a huge rock that overlooked Harlem and I wrote. I wrote about the trees starting to camouflage the buildings and the daffodils and crocuses pushing up and blooming. I wrote about the first robin redbreast I saw scampering in the brush near where I was sitting. I wrote about how I am living with my albatross and still leaping over hurdles. I wrote how beautiful this park is and how thankful I am I could sit on a piece of glacier in New York City in the midst of steel and concrete; a haven for me to take in the beauty and say goodbye to my Sensei. So in my own way I said “Later, Louis.” And “Thank you” to a very sacred person in a place that is sacred to me.

Have you found your sacred space? Where you can be - and just “be.” Where can your senses be stimulated and soothed, nudged and nurtured? I have a few “sanctuaries” in town that help me hold myself in reverence and gives me a place to count my blessings. New York has those gems; tree-lined parks where you would never think that NYC would be right over your shoulder, or a niche in a museum that has a special painting or sculpture or book. It only takes a beautiful day, even a rainy one, and a Metro card. So as I went to my sanctuary to say goodbye, a fellow Taurean*, a generous teacher and amazing poet, I will celebrate his life by continuing with what he generously gave me, knowing that I am richer, smarter and more faithful to my vision having had Louis Reyes Rivera point the way. BE HONEST.

(*Louis was born May 19th, 1945; my birthday is May 8th.)

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