



Video Story Transcript

Finding Light in the Dungeons of Ghana with Mother Mary Carter Smith

By: Storyteller Edie McLoud Armstrong
www.storytelling.org/mamaedie

Link to YouTube Video:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YxXn6FWdTZ8>

Note: The following is a transcription of a spoken story performance and may not reflect textbook perfect English. It will guide you as you listen (or read) along.

Hello, my name is Mama Edie McLoud Armstrong. In 1996, I went to Ghana, West Africa for the very first time with my friends Betty and Wadiya. Oh, the feelings I had inside me! I was so excited and there was so many things that we saw. We saw beautiful, tall, towering palm trees wavin' in the breeze and beautiful, white sandy beaches all along the highways. And the stunning beauty and strength of African women, who were carrying huge, and often heavy, baskets on their heads, with their babies tied firmly on their backs. And the bright and beautiful eyes of children wearing uniform after school, carrying their books, carrying their backpacks on their backs, and laughin' and talkin' on their way home. And even goat herders guiding small, little herds of goats across a busy street right in the center of the city.

But among the most profound experiences that I had there, was going into the dungeons of Cape Coast Castle. This was one of many forts that dotted the western coast of Africa, along the Co... Ghos... along the Coast of Guinea. And it was in these dungeons that African men, women, and children were held there, captive in chains, awaiting "shipment" to other places around the world. Now, this was something that occurred during a period of business called the Transatlantic Slave Trade.

Now, granted, slavery was a practice that had been used in many countries for centuries. However, none, none was ever as brutal, inhumane or pervasive as this one. In fact, in quiet ways sometimes, it continues to destructively impact the lives of children of African descent worldwide, even to this day. Now, one might think

that once a person had gone into one of those dismal dungeons that a subsequent visit might be a little bit easier.

Let me tell you how it happened for me. On my first trip in '96, that white stone castle loomed ominously in the distance as our car approached the fishing village of Cape Coast. And we were greeted in the fishing village with warm smiles, and the smells of fresh fish and salt sea air. We saw brilliantly colored blossoms and birds and saw people busily going about their daily work. There were men mending fish nets and women on their way to market or to the bank. And there were children laughing and running in play. One would never imagine that amid such beauty and normal life that anyone would ever have perpetrated something as horrific as the slave trade on such a kind and gentle people.

Well, we first went up into the castle and we saw these comfortable accommodations that the British governmental representatives had for themselves. And, oh, such pomp and decor that reflected the high esteem in which they held themselves. Even the dark and rusted cannons that still sat on top of the roof, still poised out at sea, daring anybody to come and take what the British had already stolen. It was really something. It was quite something to behold.

Then we started going down into the dungeons. And once we got there, our guide had taken us to an opening that looked something like a cave. And as soon as we got inside, it went almost immediately pitch black. And we had to duck our heads because of the low overhang and it was difficult to walk on the uneven path. And as our eyes were getting adjusted to the darknes, and as we were peering around that space, we were able to see bloodstains and shackles still hanging from the dungeon walls. The guide spoke to us of many horrific crimes that had been committed there. It made me sad. It made me angry and very, very frustrated. But more than anything, I was really, really so very sad that anyone would have to go through something like that.

Then my second visit, that was in 1997. This time, I had gone with a research study group from Medgar Evers College in New York. It was an amazing experience, a very eye-opening experience led by Kofi Lamotey. Again, there was a trip into the dungeons that was planned. And I'm thinking, "Well, that was painful but I've been there, I've done that. So, I got this, right." Hmm. It was harder than the first time.

Then my third time going to Ghana was the first time that the National Association of Black Storytellers had gone, in order to participate in Panafest. Now this is a royal, regal celebration where the kings, and the queens, and the chiefs, and the princes and princesses all come out in their golden, royal regalia. And they welcome children of the African Diaspora to "come back home" and to meet each other, and to plan and to celebrate our victories. But more than anything, to look forward to how we can uplift the lives of our people.

Of course, another trip to the dungeon was planned. Now this time, I'm on the bus. I'm on the tour bus and we're riding along. And I see that castle in the distance comin' up - palm trees, glistening sea. But my stomach started to tighten and I suddenly felt like I didn't think that I wanted to go there again. So, I went inside myself, into that space within me, that space of light where you go sometimes to ask for guidance. And it was as though I heard a voice that said, "You're not finished. This is a necessary pain." So, I took a deep breath and I said, "Okay." I was obedient. Now, I had the option I could have gone to a restaurant there on the sea, had a little drink, and enjoyed the seaside and waited for the others to come back. But I was obedient and I went.

Well, by this time, I couldn't assume that it was gonna be any easier than it was before. But I did wonder how this time might be a bit different. Well, one of the differences was that I ended up escorting one of our co-founders of the storytelling organization, Mother Mary Carter Smith, who herself was an elder. Now Mama Mary was a spitfire! Little, bitty, tiny thing but a spitfire, nonetheless. And so even though she was small in stature, she was really big in her influence on us. And along with co-founder Mama Linda Goss, they were our

Queen Mothers. And like all African Queen Mothers should, they provided a bit of guidance, a bit of light whenever we needed it.

So here we are, we're about to go up the stairs, those broken stairs of the slave castle. And once we got inside, we're looking around the space. And we found ourselves in a room where the guide had mentioned to us served as a chapel for the governor. And Mama Mary looked at me. She looked so confused. She said, "Wait a minute." And she said right out loud, she said, "You mean to tell me that while my people are down in the dungeon suffering, the governor had the nerve to be up here praying? Now what kind of nonsense is that!" I understood her position. I wondered the same thing the first time I went to Ghana.

Eventually, we go back downstairs, down these broken stairs and we start to go inside the dungeon. Now Mama Mary didn't have too far to duck because she was so short. But her walk, her gait, was a little bit unsteady. So, I was holding onto her hand as we came down the stairs and as we went inside the dungeons. And then as we were first in the men's dungeon and then in the women's dungeon, the tour guide was going on about the atrocities that had happened there. And we looked around and saw all these shadows and artifacts of a horrible time past. And I saw Mama Mary's frail fingers going along the edge of the walls where she saw dried blood. And she ran her fingers over shackles that were still hanging there. And I saw the profound sadness in her face.

And then as the tour guide was continuing to go on and on about things that had happened, I noticed that Mama Mary was suddenly starting to stiffen. And her fists clenched and her arms shot straight down by her side. And, and her head tilted back and there was a low rumbling sound coming from her throat. And she was rocking back and forth and the rumbling sound in her throat got louder and louder until she screeeeeeeeamed (weeping sounds).

She screamed and in her scream, you can feel the pain and the agony of those ancestors who had been there, whose pain we can still feel today. I went close to her but not too close, 'cause I saw what was happening. She was in deep communion with the spirits of those ancestors. But I wanted to be there for support and, all of a sudden, she just collapsed right in my arms. And other storytellers also came around and there we were, crumpled on the floor, trying to support Mama Mary so she wouldn't hurt herself. And she just cried and we rocked her. And some of the other storytellers cried too.

In time, she was able to stand back up and when she did, she seemed to stand a little bit taller than she had when we first walked inside. And I noticed this small hole, way up high, in the roof of the women's dungeon, where a little bit of sunlight was shafting through. And that was the only sunlight that the Africans who were imprisoned there had for weeks and sometimes months, until they were piled onto ships and sent away to other places.

So, after we all collected ourselves, we were guided to the final portal. That final doorway, where the Africans left and went out onto the sands, onto the beach to be loaded up like so many cattle onto the ships and taken away. That was the Door of No Return.

So, we, the storytellers, also took that trek and walked through the Door of No Return. And as we got onto the beach, some of us were praying, some people were singing with their arms outstretched to the sky. Some had their arms around each other's waists with heads touching, and just rocking and humming together. Some just rocked back and forth and prayed.

As we were standing there, I thought about that light, that little shaft of light that came through. And I was reminded, as I saw Mama Mary standin' taller and walkin' stronger than she had when we first came to that place. I was reminded that often, even in our darkest hours, every now and then, when we... quiet ourselves,

we can go inside ourselves to that little place of light and ask for guidance. And it comes and with it, we can lift ourselves up and find a better way.