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[Contents of Issue Menu](#)

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My Thoughts About Mother's Day
By James Jennings
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First, I want to thank BlackCommentator.com for this creative and timely idea, an issue devoted to motherhood in our communities...powerful, indeed!

My thoughts about motherhood...I would like to take the opportunity to say a few words about my grandmother, Esperanza Guzman. But, of course, everything is connected to everything...so, I want to also express my gratitude to my parents, James Jennings, Sr., and Natividad Baez Jennings.

My abuela, Esperanza Guzman, after whom my wife, Lenora, and I named one of our daughters, Taleah Esperanza Jennings, died about 20 years ago. Almost every summer from a child until 16 years of age, my parents would ship me from NYC to a small barrio in Rio Piedras, Puerto Rico, called, San Jose, also referred to, popularly, as La Laguna. While not as dense and impoverished as "el Fangito", or "la Perla", places renowned for urban poverty in Latin America, la Lugana was smaller, a bit more rural-feeling than these other places.

Although NYC's Bedstuy is my "hometown", as a youth, I never knew this place between one day after the school year ended, and one or two days before the new school year would begin. As a child and teen I was always frustrated that I had to leave my friends at the end of the school year and not see them until the new school year when I returned from Puerto Rico. My summers during these years were mostly all spent with my abuelita. I remember many summers during the 1960s, walking with her over miles to get to a store, or to visit a relative, or to pick up free shoes, or to

clean someone's home in the big city of viejo San Juan. Everyone once in a while we would catch "la Cubanita" a quaint and rickety bus service to take us from one town to the next on our way to viejo San Juan. Although it cost 5 cents - cinco chavos - (or, "un bellon" to use a very, very, old term....) to use la Cubanita, I remember the driver many times letting folks on for free.

We did not have "modern" plumbing in Abuela's house in San Jose, but had to use...una "latrina", for bathroom purposes. Much of our daily staple was based upon what we picked from trees in our backyard, or what neighbors shared/traded with us. Though very impoverished, Abuela was always proud of her humanity, and the fact that, no matter what, she treated her neighbors with dignity. And, she always insisted on being treated, with dignity.

There are so many lessons I learned from her, and which I only appreciated much later in my life. I can only comment on but a few thoughts in this short space. My abuela showed me, in her daily struggles for family survival, and in her responses and resistance to subtle and not-so-subtle insults heaped upon her as she cleaned homes in viejo San Juan, that one should always listen to the concerns of others; she showed me that humanity is not defined by educational degrees, or money, or position. Alas, some people have degrees, money, and position, but have never learned to be humane - or may have decided that being humane, and kind, are not good things to be about if one wants to keep money and position. Through her daily struggles for survival in el barrio de San Jose, la Laguna, she also showed me that commitment to, and solidarity with, community are resources of most critical importance in any place on this planet.

These kinds of resources are especially evident among our mothers. Motherhood has represented a very powerful, though quiet and invisible, at times, resource in our communities. How do we use this kind of resource as a basis for social change? How do we approach motherhood to make this a basis for how we treat all children in our communities so that they understand and value the values of respect and dignity for all people, again, regardless of their position in society?

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[Contents of Issue Menu](#)

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[Home](#)

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