

Dr. Claudia Lynn Thomas

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God Spare Life: An Autobiography

Dr. Claudia Lynn Thomas

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Adinkra Symbols



Nyame Biribi Wo Soro – lit. trans.
“God is in the heavens” –
symbolizing hope.

Adinkra symbols are designs that originated in West Africa, in a region that is now known as the Republic of Ghana. They have been used for centuries as a form of language to relay messages. Adinkra symbols are parables that represent spiritual concepts and also honor human characteristics. Originally printed on cloths to be worn during funerals, Adinkra markings can now be found widely in fabrics and wood carvings of West Africa.

At the Union Temple Baptist Church, an Afrocentric ministry in Washington, DC, Adinkra designs are carved into the sanctuary doors. During a visit to Union Temple, the author noticed that one of the carvings, the Nyame Biribi Wo Soro symbol, resembled an anatomic drawing of two kidneys. This symbol signifies “God is in the heavens,” symbolizing hope and inspiration. Nyame Biribi Wo Soro has been chosen to appear on the cover of *God Spare Life*, not only for its meaning but also because of the importance to the author of kidney transplantation.



Gye Nyame – lit. trans.
“except God, I fear none” –
symbolizing the omnipotence,
omnipresence and immortality
of God.

A variety of Adinkra symbols have been used throughout this book to characterize the chapters. For an in-depth understanding of these symbols, the reader is referred to *The Adinkra Dictionary, A Visual Primer on The Language of Adinkra*, a publication by W. Bruce Willis, The Pyramid Complex, 1998.

Claudia Thomas
January, 2007



Onyankopon Adom Nti
Biribiara Beye Yie – lit. trans.
“by God’s grace, all will be
well” – symbolizing hope,
providence, faith.

Publisher’s Note on the Adinkra Symbols: The symbols displayed throughout this book were created by Tom Collins, using Macromedia Fireworks PC software, based on several online sources, primarily the Official Website of the Republic of Ghana, <http://www.ghana.gov.gh/visiting/culture/adinkra.php>, and Jean MacDonald’s Well-Tempered Web Design site, http://www.welltempered.net/adinkra/htmls/adinkra_site.htm.

Regarding the names and their spellings in English, Mr. MacDonald cautions, “I cannot vouch for the translations. The spelling is also problematic: there are characters used in Twi transliteration which have no HTML equivalents yet.”

The Nyame Biribi Wo Soro symbol used on the cover was designed by Karin Marlett Choi on her trusty Mac, based on the author’s rendition of the symbol as she saw it on a door in Washington, DC.

Foreword



Mate Masie – lit. trans.
“what I hear, I keep” –
symbolizing wisdom,
knowledge, and prudence.

I learned of Claudia Thomas through my fiancée, Diane, who was Claudia’s first cousin. I met Claudia in 1969 when she was a member of a student search committee that interviewed candidates for the first Vassar College Director of Black Studies. My encounter with this young woman introduced me to an idealist who at the time was keen on righting the wrongs of society. I was chosen by the students and approved by the Vassar administration and served in the position of Director of Black Studies for two years.

Having observed firsthand the perseverance and dedication it took to complete this autobiography, it gives me great pleasure to write the foreword. I am thrilled to see Claudia’s story make it to publication because it is one worth telling. It combines both tragedy and triumph in a most incisive manner. Moreover, the sincere and eloquent passion with which this story is told makes it a captivating narrative. In sum, Claudia’s much anticipated *magnum opus* is, in my opinion, a must read. For those who have faced trials and tribulations and at times have felt that life’s challenges were more than they could bear, this book will provide solace and inspiration. The message from Dr. Claudia Lynn Thomas is that with faith, one can overcome.



Claudia's story is one of unprecedented achievement, harrowing experiences through the wrath of Mother Nature and great suffering through severe illness. These setbacks are followed by retreat from the brink, miraculous recovery and a phoenix-like rising to greater heights, with the promise of more lofty accomplishments to come.

To see a vibrant Claudia Thomas today, knowing the enormous agony and adversity she has faced, conjures up thoughts of some of the better known Biblical references such as "Daniel in the lion's den" (Daniel 6:16-23), "David slaying Goliath" (Samuel 1, 17:49-50) and "mustard seed and mountains" (Matthew 17:20). For me, the presence of a Higher Order best explains this riveting account of victory over seemingly insurmountable obstacles.

Claudia Thomas has been the beneficiary of divine intervention. She also had the support of her family, particularly her sister, Catherine, and her mother, Daisy Mae, who was Claudia's guardian angel. Claudia's mother literally elbowed her daughters, Claudia and Catherine, onto society's fast track at a very early age. Daisy's "will not be denied" approach to raising her children virtually assured that they would excel in their chosen fields of medicine and law. Daisy, with her husband Charles, inculcated admirable moral and spiritual values, such as, self-determination, integrity and excellence in the Thomas sisters. Despite the plight facing many young people at the time, the Thomas household strived to ensure that their daughters would not become another grim statistic. They also imparted a deeply rooted sense of cultural pride and a strong sense of self so that Claudia and Catherine could honorably claim their place in the world. There would be no wavering or identity crises in Claudia and Catherine's lives. The societal standard for success was set very high, and they surpassed it. In turn, the accolades and honors poured in. However, Daisy's work was not done.

From 1986 to 1990, Claudia resided and had a medical practice on the island of St. Thomas, in the U.S. Virgin Islands. Just when Claudia was hitting stride and positioning



herself for even more extraordinary achievements, she was blindsided by catastrophe. In 1989, Hurricane Hugo hit the Caribbean and wreaked havoc in the Virgin Islands. The nightmare of those demonic, tempestuous hours made it seem as if the end was near. There was considerable material loss, yet life had not been taken. The ordeal gave Claudia pause to examine the power of God to spare life. As fate would have it, the hurricane was only a dress rehearsal, a prelude to unimaginable human suffering that would test Claudia's faith and endurance.

Readers of this compelling memoir will vicariously live through the account of Claudia's personal devastation, illness, setbacks and frustrations. They will shake their heads in wonder and disbelief. They will ask the proverbial question, "Why?" This and many other queries about how Claudia survived all of these life experiences will be answered, although each reader will invariably put their own spin on both the hows and the whys of the story.

In my view, the key to Claudia's survival is simply a mother's love – Daisy Mae Thomas, armed with an almost supernatural, angelic power, protected Claudia from almost every adversity. With defiance, tenacity and prayerful vigil, she successfully led her child out of mortal danger, and back to the land of the living. This story underscores a kind of faith most of us may never be able to understand.

You, the reader, will rejoice and join in the celebration of life, embracing the "been in the storm so long" metaphor. You will applaud and cheer the numerous awards and tributes. You will rally through the ups and downs of this drama and breathe a sigh of relief at the outcome. You will come to appreciate the healing power of prayer and the richness of family ties. We should all be so fortunate to have as unconditionally loving a mother as Daisy Thomas and as uncompromisingly committed a sister as Catherine Thomas.

God Spare Life is a formidable book, as much about a mother's love, faith, trust and resolve as it is about the first African American female orthopaedic surgeon in the United



States and her extraordinary accomplishments against all odds. Dr. Claudia Thomas' courage and inner strength will challenge us to look deep within ourselves for that inner fortitude we all possess to confront life's challenges.

I believe that this autobiography will permanently alter, perhaps even transform the lives of readers who share in this joyful, poignant, yet unbelievably true and ultimately triumphant story.

Milfred C. Fierce, Ph.D.
Professor Emeritus in Africana Studies
Brooklyn College, CUNY
Atlanta, Georgia
June, 2007



Prologue



Nyame Biribi Wo Soro – lit. trans.
“God is in the heavens” –
symbolizing hope.

I am a woman of science, about as highly trained as any individual can be. I spent the first thirty years of my life preparing to be a physician. The instruction began as a toddler, sitting alongside my sister at our kitchen table while my mother held up homemade flash cards to teach reading and basic arithmetic.

My mother’s own learning disability had taught her the value of education. Dyslexia may have held her back, but with the head start that my mother gave me, I could read, write, add and subtract by the time I started kindergarten.

While I was being taught my ABCs and how to do math at my mother’s knee, my father was teaching me manual skills, and to pursue excellence in all endeavors. He also taught me about God.

Growing up within a solidly structured family empowered me to accomplish nearly all goals that I set





for myself. My graduation from a Yale surgical residency program four months after my thirtieth birthday distinguished me as the first African American woman to become an orthopaedic surgeon. I had mastered the coveted techniques of repairing ruptured bone, muscle and tissue, and I earned an invitation to join the faculty of one of the most prestigious hospitals in the world. It seemed I had reached a pinnacle. But my greatest accomplishment would be to put scientific doctrine aside and place my faith in God.

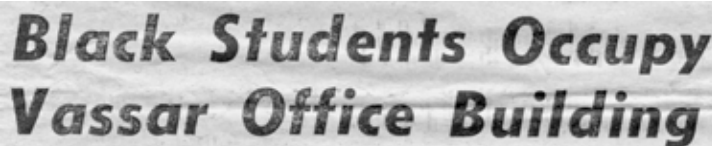
Faith has always played some role in my life. In childhood, I learned the words to Christian prayers, Scripture, and hymns so well that as an adult, I still knew them by rote. Long after I had left home and had stopped attending church on a regular basis, I called upon those words, pursuing their essence. But the power of the words escaped me. I would spend many years in search of their meaning.

Other than reciting grace and, "Now I lay me down to sleep," I didn't have to pray much as a child, because my parents were always there to protect and guide me. I had faith in the power of my parents and understood little about the power of God. Throughout college, medical school, and my orthopaedic training, I prayed with some degree of faith, but my conversations with God were mainly wishes and hopes that something good would occur. It was during the tempestuous periods later in my life that my faith evolved.

My life can be perceived as a series of three major storms.

As a young adult, I rode out the squalls of my coming of age as a college student in the 1960s, an awakening that transformed me from a cowering teenager into a rebellious activist. Then, in pursuit of a postgraduate education, I

NY Post headline, p. 3,
col. 1, Oct. 30, 1969



**Black Students Occupy
Vassar Office Building**

took on the intellectual challenge of a career path that led to orthopaedic surgery, a discipline

that remains largely male-dominated, even today.

I eventually entered a stormy marriage and moved to the island of St. Thomas. It wasn't until I witnessed the calming power of the Twenty-Third Psalm as Hurricane Hugo ravished my home that I began to experience a higher level of faith. While trapped in the jaws of a demonic hurricane, I clung to the arms of a sofa and prayed repeatedly, "God spare life! God spare life!"

And months later, when there were demons battling within me, withering my body to a hollow shell, my faith gave me the strength to believe that God would spare life again.

For, as awful as Hugo was, it could not match the storm of the desperate illness that threatened my very life. Shortly after my fortieth birthday, I was diagnosed with kidney disease so severe, only a transplant or dialysis would save my life.

The world as I knew it stopped spinning. I was forced to close my medical practice, leave St. Thomas and focus on my own salvation. For sixteen months, I stared death so closely in the face that I could feel it sucking out my physical and emotional strength through my nostrils.

My education and training could not spare me from illness. Only God could do that. He worked through my mother, my sister, my friends, my physicians and people that prayed for me whom I have yet to meet.

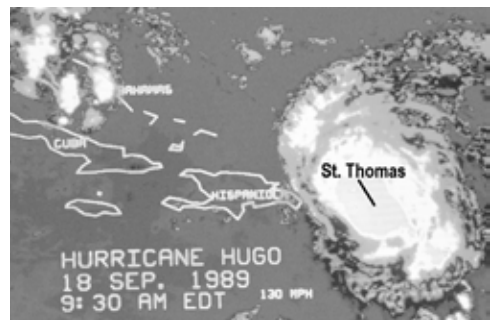
BLACK WOMAN IN A MAN'S WORLD

Baltimore's Dr. Claudia L. Thomas is the only Black woman practicing orthopedic surgery in the U.S.



Excerpt from *Ebony* magazine article, Oct. 1981, pgs. 91-93

Hurricane Hugo over St. Thomas, Sept. 18, 1989, NOAA satellite photo (label pointing to St. Thomas added), <http://www.photolib.noaa.gov/historic/nws/hugo1.html>





There have been several miracles in my life that cannot be explained by science. My faith evolved with each miracle, and now in my conversations with God, I no longer wish and hope. I thank Him in advance for the victories I know He will help me accomplish. This is the pinnacle of my faith today.



Part I

Tropical Depression

1 ~ Daisy's Watch



Akokonan – lit. trans.
“the leg of a hen” –
symbolizing parental
nurturing and protection.

“She looks too young to be so sick,” said the night nurse. “More like fourteen than forty.” The nurse checked the infusion rate of patient number three’s intravenous line and recorded this number below the vital signs.

In the intensive care unit of Washington, DC’s Greater Southeast Hospital, there was no distinction between day and night. It was 11:45 p.m., but the corridors and rooms of the I.C.U. remained brightly lit. There were no windows to betray whether the hands of the clock approached midnight or noon.

The patient in cubicle three lay apparently unaware of her surroundings, yet combative. Her frail body writhed as she struggled against the cloth restraints that bound her wrists and ankles to the bed. Adhesive tape secured large strips of foam rubber padding onto the bed rails to prevent any self-inflicted injury. Her skin had darkened as a result of chronic disease, and sable pigmentation encircled her eyes. A portion of the left side of her tongue had been bitten off. Her mouth gaped, its thick, scarred tongue protruding like the appendage of the letter Q.



Daisy Mae Thomas

Daisy holding me



A handsome woman stood at the bedside, her facial expression concerned but resolute. This was Daisy, mother of the patient in cubicle three. Daisy appeared no older than 50, and she wore no fatigue or worry that would reveal a true age of 67.

Daisy pressed her plump body against the bed rails and softly stroked her daughter's moist brow. She whispered the same "sweet baby" phrases that she had spoken whenever her daughter had been ill as a little girl. Though that little girl was now a woman, she was still Daisy's child. She was the daughter who, as a two-year-old, Daisy had taught letters, numbers, words and phrases. She was the child Daisy had dressed in Brownie uniforms and tap shoes at the age of five. She was the one in whom Daisy had instilled such a thirst for knowledge that she spent the first thirty years of her life training to achieve what had never been accomplished before. She was the daughter who had adopted her mother's spirit of activism and who challenged the status quo at the prestigious institutions she attended. She was the reason Daisy had left New York City in 1986 and moved to a Caribbean island as her child's guardian. She was the one who had been through storms bred by nature and spawned by the Devil.

Now, she was again the child who struggled desperately to cling to life itself, and Daisy was once again her daughter's caregiver. All other aspects of Daisy's life were on hold.

Indefinitely.

The nursing staff disregarded the visitors' schedule and allowed Daisy's bedside vigil. After all, Daisy was more familiar with the procedure for peritoneal dialysis than the unit nurses. She had observed her daughter's ritual of running fluid in and out of her abdomen four times a day, every day, for two months. Now, Daisy had taken charge of

that portion of the hospital care herself. The procedure was necessary for her child's survival.

Keeping her eyes cast upon her daughter, Daisy addressed the nurse. "I don't like that expression on her face," she said. "She looks, you know ..." The nurse reassured Daisy that the doctors said the spinal fluid was clean.

"But what about that spot on her brain scan?" There was anxiety in Daisy's voice. "They say there's been brain damage."

The nurse hesitated, then forced a smile. "She's scheduled for another scan in the morning," she replied.

Four days had passed since my grand mal seizure, and I had not regained consciousness. The post-ictal state, as the time period following a grand mal seizure is known, was of unusually long duration. But then, so many aspects of my illness had been unusual.

The unconscious mind processes no new information and holds only its memories. My exhausted body lay in a hospital bed receiving intensive care while my brain chronicled a collage of vivid images and events, some experienced and some constructed from stories my parents had told me.

My darkness faded to gray, then faint hues appeared and gave forth a spectrum of light that coalesced into a colorful scene. In the image that materialized, I was a little girl with chocolate skin wearing a sunflower-colored dress. Seated at a remotely familiar fire-engine red oval kitchen table with chrome art deco trim, I stared into the amber glow of my father's face and smiled, captivated by one of his tall tales.



Charles Mitchell Thomas

