

BOOK REVIEW by Zainab Furqan

It Is Well with My Soul: The Extraordinary Life of a 106-Year-Old Woman
Ella Mae Cheeks Johnson with Patricia Mulcahy. New York: Penguin, 2010.

“It is Well with my Soul” is an autobiography by Ella Mae Cheeks Johnson, a woman who celebrated her 106th birthday just before the book was published. From the beginning, I found the most captivating aspect of the book to be its conversational tone, which made me feel as if I was sitting across Ella Mae in front of a fireplace, hands wrapped around a warm cup of tea, listening.

There is both humility and pride in Ella Mae’s voice as she leads the reader through her life. She begins with her childhood, in which she describes the passing away of her mother and being raised by foster parents who she believes were the children of slaves. She speaks of a loving home in which she felt welcomed and cherished. This spirit, of giving without counting favours, resonates throughout her own actions and contributions to society.

It is clear that Ella Mae’s academic accomplishments are a source of personal satisfaction and pride and rightfully so. She went on to become a social worker, receiving grants, scholarships and bursaries. There is a strong independence in her pursuit of an education and the building of a career but she does not fail to acknowledge the generosity of others, which allowed her to graduate first from Fisk University and later from Western Reserve University, as one of the only two black individuals who were admitted in her year.

Ella Mae talks about her first husband passing away, and the process of raising two boys by herself. Again, the candidness of her voice shines through. She doesn’t minimize the difficulty but she doesn’t make it seem insurmountable. Having lived under Jim Crow laws, she speaks about civil rights struggles that were taking place in colleges, protesting discrimination and segregation. It is fascinating to read about these from the perspective of a woman who would later on attend Obama’s inauguration. Ella Mae’s experience at the inauguration is perhaps one of most exciting parts of the book. Determined to be a legacy for her grandchildren and great-grandchildren, she spent seven hours in the cold, at the age of 105, to hear the momentous speech. Those with her recount that “she never once complained”.

The book is replete with lessons learned through experience, and perhaps some of the most useful are in the section of her book entitled, “Aging Successfully”. “Independent thinking is the key to freshness of thought and consideration”, she explains. Ella Mae never gave up her autonomy in making decisions and formulating her own beliefs. This exercise of reasoning and logic is inspiring for someone at any point of their life. While she holds very strong religious convictions, her tone throughout the book is humble and non-imposing. She goes on to explain that another key to successful aging is “celebrating the things that deserve it”. She found that as she began to see her years as opportunities and blessings, as she began to celebrate the life that she had been given

each year, she began to more zealously use her time to help others. She writes, “I know that being a Good Samaritan has contributed to my longevity”. For Ella Mae, compassion is a life-giving force that sustained her.

There were points throughout the book during which my interest faded. There are several tangents, and while some provide a welcome break from a linear telling of Johnson’s story, others can disengage the reader. Because the story is told candidly, many small events and details are recounted, in which the reader may get lost. I think a stronger editing process may have resulted in a finished product that could still be true to Ella Mae’s voice and story while being more engaging for the reader.

Ella Mae Cheeks Johnson passed away in March, 2010. In her book, she spoke of the civil rights movement and liberation from oppressive laws and social structures. But what is most inspiring for me is the liberation of her own self. From changing the word ‘obey’ to ‘cherish’ in her marriage vows, to donating money to the Armenians, it is clear that our protagonist’s vision was never rigidly bound by social conventions. She seems to be dismissive of what would be ‘normal’ constraints, pursuing her goals with fierce determination. Not having anything to give from her own self, Johnson asked attendees of her birthday party to donate money to her cause, identifying herself as an “unabashed beggar”. When her mobility was restricted, she tells us, “The chair limits only the movements of my body, not my active mind.” It is only fitting that one of the last chapters of her book is entitled, “Emancipation Proclamation” and begins with Martin Luther King’s quote, “We must accept finite disappointment but never lose infinite hope.” Ella Mae Johnson’s legacy is indeed one of resilience, compassion and infinite hope.