

Meet the Eatmans

I always thought the Cosby Show was unreal. Everything I read and heard about the black family in America suggested crisis, confusion and concern. Black youth in the prison system. Black boys dropping out of school. Black men who disappear after the baby is born. Blacks on the margin of the economy. Blacks still bearing the heavy psychological and social burdens of a racially oppressive past. The Cosby's were a middle class invention to soothe the conscience of white America, I once told myself. And then I met the Eatmans.

The invitation to spend the American holiday called "Thanksgiving" with a family called the Eatmans generated the usual excitement I feel when meeting strangers, but little more than that. Yet when one of those yellow taxis dropped me on the corner of one of the most famous streets in the world, Broadway, I suddenly felt underdressed. The white doorman announced my arrival through the fancy intercom system and I found myself in those lifts that look like the ones Donald Trump's victims are dropped into after hearing the magic words "you're fired." Now I reprimanded myself, "you should have put on that tie." Then everything changed.

As I stepped out of the lift, a door down the well-carpeted passage swung open and five bright, smiling, black faces peered at the stranger without a tie. It was the kind of collective smile that embraces and I immediately felt at home, one of the family. Total strangers hugging me, welcoming me, and pointing me in the direction of the most delicious smells of home-made food ever. This does not happen on the streets of New York City, people hugging strangers, unless the hugger is crazy. Yet here I was surrounded by love.

The door to the apartment swung open at regular intervals and large black men and their wives and children came sprinting through. I have never seen grown men hug each other for so long and with so much love. This hugging continued throughout the night. A younger brother would suddenly go to an older brother, look him straight in the eye, and say "I appreciate you." Laughter filled the room. Children would report on their progress at school, with 'high fives' around the kitchen. Mothers would tell of their accomplishments as teachers in the local Harlem school run, believe it or not, by the Eatmans. One by one the members of this incredible family would share warm stories of respect, love, admiration and achievement.

Suddenly, the youngest of the Eatmans, a handsome, braided brother who is a professor at one of the great New York universities glides towards the piano, his older sister in hand. I closed my eyes and listened to one of the most beautiful pieces of sacred music as brother played and sister sang and then, as if on cue, everybody joined in with perfectly harmonized voices lifting the tune, "The Lord has something in mind." The Brooklyn Tabernacle Choir could not do better; I had died and gone to heaven, and became conscious of moisture in the eyes and a lump in the throat.

The patriarch of the family, the Reverend Eatman, gathered us in a circle and as we all hug tightly, he says something profound. "There is more education in this room, than in whole sections of communities around us." That was not an idle boast. One of the brothers was a dentist; there were solid school and university teachers in the room; several had doctoral degrees, including the head of the family. As the

father affirms every one of us around the table to loud humming sounds of “yea”, you might as well have been in a black Baptist Church or in the middle of a civil rights march.

“What is your secret,” I asked the senior parents regarding their spectacular success in raising these well-balanced children. What follows is Lesson 101 in raising a family. Father and mother insist that every child owns their own property; ‘it is about assets, that is what makes us independent.’ The family heads are conscious of the struggle of black people to survive in the dominant culture; “we are the only people who hand over our children to be taught by the enemy,” says the patriarch, thereby justifying the operation of their own school in which their students get to visit Ghana, Milan, South Africa and Paris. What becomes crystal clear in this family is that without education, there is no future, black or white. As I reluctantly leave the Eatman apartment late that night, the younger brother leaves me with his trademark greeting, “Walk in Victory!” If only he knew.