

## SECTION 1 - THE FRAME

### CHAPTER 2 - THE EMERGING ADULT: learning about self

#### Introduction

The transition from St Vincent to England coincided with that critical pubescent stage in my physical and psychological development. I was fourteen and desperately trying to make sense of who I was in relation to the world around me. As is so often the case, individual events and incidents are experienced as good or bad, pleasurable or painful occurrences to be lived in the moment and it is only with hindsight we are able to see the patterns formed, by those seemingly unconnected incidents, as they cohere. The years subsequent to our move to England were formative to my perception of self - image, identity, and esteem. It influenced the over development of some aspects of my self and the under development and suppression of other aspects. In this chapter I reflect on the years between arriving in England and starting work, and identify and review significant occurrences from which important lessons were learned consciously or unconsciously.

#### Coming to England - leaving home

The contrast between St.Vincent and England was great. The difference between my dreams and reality was stark and needed to be dealt with. However, within the challenges of day to day practicalities and the struggles to survive in an unwelcoming and unfriendly if not often openly hostile environment, there was not much room to deal with the emotional pain of disorientation, displacement, loss of identity, and shattered dreams. For many years I did not know that I had any other feeling than relief at leaving St Vincent behind. My attention was focused on the experience of being in England and on everything that I felt would be offered to us. I was therefore unaware of what it meant to leave St Vincent - Home. I remember many of the events of the day on which we left but I do not recall any sadness or tears. There were many people whom I would have been sad to leave behind but my attention was focussed elsewhere. Many years later, in my twenties, I began to realise that St Vincent - Home - was very important to me and that England held many disappointments for me. Some of these feelings were tapped in a "Free Fall Writing Activity" at Bath University. We were given a topic and ask to write for a few minutes without stopping or correcting anything. The first trigger was "*A sound from Childhood*" and the following piece of writing emerged:

*The beating of the waves - shush shoooo, shush shoooo, shush shoooo .... The music by which I was awoken, and the music by which I slept. I had not realised the extent to which I miss that sound or the extent to which I miss that place until this moment. Being asked to write about a sound in childhood and suddenly I can feel the warmth of the sun, and see the beach, the river, and the sky laden with stars. That dark, dark blue sky, and those stars which*

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*seemed to close in - surrounding me in a blanket - so close that as a child I believed that I could grow tall enough to touch them.*

*The darkness of a tropical night lit by the darting light of fireflies, the chirping of the crickets, the calling of toads, and children's voices singing, as they danced and had fun playing those games I was not allowed to join in with. Moon lit nights that were so magical.*

The second piece of writing was to the trigger " *The first time I ...* "

*The first time I experienced an English winter - arriving by ship at Southampton to the greyness of a November day and mist or was it fog? I was not sure. I had heard those words, but I did not know how to distinguish them. I had known that it would have been the start of winter when we arrived in England, and I had been expecting it to be cold - but I had not known about the degree of coldness that I experienced on that November day. The sky seemed so grey, it was as if the sun had gone away. It was as if everything that was familiar had fled and here I was with my Mom, brother, and sisters in this strange place ..... waiting ... looking for Daddy among the sea of unfamiliar faces.*

*The first time I saw such grey, smoke-covered, dark houses lined up in seemingly unending rows ... Was this England? Where were the wide and open green fields about which I had fantasised?*

### **Learning about self in a System which devalues women and anyone perceived not to be white.**

As I reviewed and reflected on my early experiences I realised that in those early years I was being taught, very subtly, about the respective values and roles of men and women, White and Black people. I learnt these roles in a variety of different settings, and in the formal education setting I learnt about much more than the stated subjects on the curriculum.

### **Learning through social interactions**

- **Home**

Reuniting with my father was something about which I had dreamt a lot, never anticipating that there might be difficulties in doing this. I somehow thought that we would be able to take up just where we left off. I objectively knew that this was an event towards which my father had worked for many years, but this was not evident in our meeting. It seemed to me that we were to him a series of tasks to be sorted out. There was warm clothing to be bought, schools to be arranged, orientation trips to be accomplished, registration with doctors and dentists to be made, house purchase to be finalised, rooms to be decorated - so it went on. - While I wanted to sit on his lap and to tell him about all the things we had done in those years that we had been apart. I remember my disappointment the first time I did some ironing for the family. I had carefully ironed his shirts. I was proud of my achievement and I wanted him to notice. I waited and waited but he never commented - he had not noticed.

I wanted his attention and found that the main way I could get it was through arguing with him. I knew within me that he secretly admired fighters. However that was not

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the relationship I wanted with him. I wanted to feel loved by him and did not. Many years later he was able to explain to me (and it is still even more years on that I am able to accept) that he expressed his love for me by being the best father he knew how to be. This meant carefully managing finances; providing the best home that he was able to; providing every educational opportunity he could; instilling within us a clear sense of right and wrong; encouraging within us faith in God; and fulfilling the strong sense of duty and responsibility he felt as the head of the household. As an adult in my twenties I was stunned to discover that love for him was leaving the warmth and friendliness of the Caribbean and coming and staying in the cold hostility of London. He talked about the signs saying "No Irish, no Coloureds and no dogs" and the difficulty of finding accommodation. He spoke of the number of years when he was forced to share a room with his friend, and of how hard it was to find property where people would be prepared to sell to a Black family. Getting work was also difficult. The worst jobs were open to them at that time for very poor wages. Love for him was keeping his objective in mind and managing his money and himself well to be able to achieve it. His way of parenting lacked the softness, closeness and affection of my mother's style. I did not understand this and as a result felt unloved and carried a great sense of loss for many years.

My parents operated along stereotypical lines. He was the main breadwinner, took responsibility for the repairs and maintenance of the house, and had main responsibility for discipline and for making all major decisions in the home. He expected that his meals would be ready when he got home from work and that he would be waited on. My mother was the carer, cook, housekeeper, shopper, and nurse. Despite the clear splitting of roles and despite the fact that my mother did not work outside of the home for most of her married life, my brother, sisters and I were all equally expected to share the family chores and to take care of our own rooms. It was seen as important that we should all be able to take care of ourselves. So it was always anticipated that girls and boy would continue beyond secondary education and that we would have careers. My father taught us that we could be whatever we wanted to be and had high expectations of us. I therefore did not see a division of labour in the work place - though there were some jobs, which it seemed strange for a girl to want to do. The division of labour in the home was one that seemed grossly unfair to me. Although I liked cooking I did not like other aspects of housework. I did not like the wife's role and had no wish to take it on. In recent years I have realised that my father was possibly the most influential person in my life and that reconnecting at the onset of puberty greatly affected my valuing of femininity and womanhood.

- **Church**

My parents were committed Christians and from the time we arrived in England we joined a small Christian fellowship close to our home. It was a non-conformist church, which did not have appointed elders and taught that the various leadership roles in the church could be shared between the male believers in the church. We came from a similar church in the Caribbean and were used to this system. However it soon became apparent that most of the Black brothers were passively discouraged from taking part in the fellowship. Their gifts and talents were not being identified and used. This puzzled me. A key teaching of our church was that as children of God we were all equal -so how could this difference in treatment be justified?

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My own family was well liked. We were regularly invited to the homes of the other families, they got to know us fairly well and over the years bonds of affection grew between us. Yet it did not seem to change their very negative perceptions of Black people. Most of the other Black folks in the church were not invited to "open house" after church on Sunday evenings. These were issues never openly discussed, though many of the Black people were clearly hurt by various events and by the lack of freedom experienced in church here compared to what it was like in the Caribbean. As we grew older, it was more difficult for us to deal with the contradiction of being treated as part of the family *and* included in private conversations about dirty and socially undesirable Black people. From the privileged position of family members, we learnt about the threat experienced, at the prospect of a Black family moving into the road, and of the neighbours' campaign to keep them out, and maintain their "quiet neighbourhood". At such times it was hard to know what they thought of us. Did they discuss these things so openly, because they had made us "honorary whites" in their minds or was it that they did not care what we thought? In most instances we did not think that there was ever any intention to cause us pain or to offend us.

However from time to time there was evidence of conscious and intentional racism. One incident that remains with me was of an occasion when I was approached after church by a visitor from a church a few miles outside of Basingstoke. He told me that he had been wondering whether I would be willing to visit his family. His son and daughter-in-law had recently adopted two Black children but they did not know anyone Black. He said that he was sure that they would like to meet me, as it would be good for the children to meet other people like themselves. He said that he would tell his wife that he had spoken to me and ask her to discuss with me a convenient time for me to visit them. I waited but his wife did not approach me. I then discovered that the visitors and I were all invited to supper with one of the families.

At supper, the wife introduced the topic of mixed-race marriages and proceeded to make the most racist comment while looking directly at me. I was horrified, and angered as I now felt in a double bind. I tried challenging some of what she said but I was the only one doing so. Others were neither agreeing nor dissenting. She and I were becoming locked, and I became more and more angry about what was happening. I felt that I could either sit and listen to her politely, or I could breach the ambience of the supper party by leaving or by naming her racism and objecting to her comments. I chose to leave but I did not feel that my hosts understood the reasons for my seemingly disruptive and rude actions - even though I suspected that they did not necessarily share her views. I was left feeling cynical, disillusioned and hurt.

My experiences at Church taught me a lot about what it meant to be Black in England and also about the development of friendships that bridged the boundaries of racial prejudice. At my local church, there was a small closely knit group of young people among whom issues of colour were not an issue, and who were open to learning together about racism. However, beyond this group, there was often the feeling of being part of yet separate - on the margin rather than central.

- **The Law**

Growing up in London in the sixties and seventies during the time of the SUS laws, incidents between the Police and male members of the family contributed to my

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knowing of myself in relation to the society. My brother, though a very law-abiding cautious person, grew up anxious about the Police because of his encounters with them and this in turn influenced the views of the family about that institution and communicated to us how we as Black people were seen by the society.

As a young teenager, Anthony did a paper round, and on a number of occasions he was followed by the Police or stopped and interrogated though he was clearly doing something that many other teenagers did. When he was older, though he did not drive, his presence in the cars of white friends seemed to make them likely to be stopped. Once when he was travelling with a white friend the Police stopped them, and his friend was questioned. They asked her if she knew him and had she invited him to ride with her. They said that there had been an incident in the area and they wondered whether he might be the person they were looking for. There were other incidents of friends being stopped and searched when he was travelling with them. Our white friends observed that they did not have such experiences when he was not with them. Through such encounters we were all learning that Black young men were not to be trusted and that they should be, and would be, constantly watched. My brother certainly learnt to be wary of the Police. My Uncle also told stories of being followed, stopped, searched and questioned as he collected or took my Aunt to or from work.

Immigration laws also played a big part in my knowing of myself in England. We came here feeling very British and with as much right to be here as there was for an English person to be in the Caribbean. However soon after being here we became aware of the speeches of Enoch Powell. As a young teenager I felt the fear, disquiet and uncertainty among friends and family each time there was another speech. We had arrived after the Notting Hill riots when it appeared that there had been fights between Caribbean young men and young White racist men. Stories of these incidents were still around, and there was an anxiety that speeches such as those would fuel the type of racial hatred previously encountered. As numbers of Ugandan and Kenyan Asians with British passports arrived in Britain the anxiety about the country being swamped by Black people grew, despite the fact that a number of immigration laws had introduced rigorous requirements that had to be satisfied before entry was permitted. The numbers arriving in Britain had substantially reduced, and the statistics showed that more Black people were leaving the country than the numbers coming in. While White people continued to be anxious about being taken over by Black people, the various Immigration Acts of the '70's progressively changed the status of Black people in Britain. Automatic entitlement to British Citizenship through birth in a British colony was removed. Our British passports were impounded if submitted for any reason, and if lost or stolen they were not replaced. We were now being required to pay a registration fee of £75.00 and submit a lot of documents to request registration as a British Citizen! This felt to me like the ultimate betrayal, and disloyalty. Citizenship was the only acknowledgement of the great benefits Britain had reaped through the exploitation of the Colonies, and now that was being withdrawn and people who had never chosen to be associated with Britain in the first place, having served their purpose were now being abandoned.

- **School**

My transition from secondary school in St Vincent was in some ways very easy and in others difficult. References, school reports etc. gained us entry to the local Grammar

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School, so a few days after arriving I had an interview with the Headmaster which would determine which stream I would join. The interview initially seemed to be going very well until I mentioned that I wanted to do Domestic Science. He said that that would not be possible as there was a clash between Domestic Science and Latin. He seemed to assume that I would obviously choose Latin. I saw it differently. To me Latin was a dead and therefore useless language while Domestic Science seemed immensely useful. I had come from a girls' school in which Domestic Science and needle work were valued equally with other subjects, and I could not understand the strong sense of irritation I had sensed from the Head of this new school. The interview concluded with him allowing me to join a stream that permitted me to do domestic science, but I was left with a strong sense that somehow I had failed. In retrospect it is apparent that the Head from his knowledge of the systems' values was trying to offer to me 'survival' skills. However coming from a girls school in which domestic science was seen to be an essential life skill for both boys and girls I did not appreciate his concern.

My first few years in school in England was characterised by a series of confusing experiences, which only fell into place much later. One of the most strange to me was the fact that the children refused to believe that I came from the Caribbean. They insisted that I must be American. They would create little tests to try to establish my true origins such as: *"Do you have cookers like these where you come from?"* - *"Yes, but we call them stoves"* - *"We knew that you were American - that's what they call cookers."* At that time I could not understand why they would not accept that I was Caribbean, it was many years later that I realised that I did not fit their stereotype of someone coming from the Caribbean. There was the assumption by both teachers and children that the standard of education in St Vincent was inferior to that in England and a constant surprise that I was abreast with, and often ahead of, my classmates. Within a term I was taking one of the top three places in most subjects yet the comments came "I guess you would probably not have covered this yet."

Having fought to do Domestic Science, it was upsetting to find the teacher cold and distant. She had a reputation in the school. Most pupils were afraid of her, but I was also warned that she did not like Black girls. I was very new to racial discrimination and did not pick up the cues very easily except as surprising and confusing interactions that were sort of non-sequiturs. One such incident was being told by the Deputy Head that the Domestic Science teacher had expressed great concerns about my ability to cope with the intellectual challenge of the theoretical part of the course. Once again I was confused. I could understand that she might be concerned about my practical ability. I was new to cookery, and particularly to English cooking, and so I would have understood if she had expressed concern about my practical competence but the theory was less challenging than many of the other subjects I took. I expected a fair objective analysis from my teachers so I was puzzled. I was further bemused that the deputy head did not think that assessment a little strange in the light of my demonstrated ability in other subjects.

This mismatch between my performance and my teachers' assessment of me continued and had a long-term influence on my career and life path. It was customary to have career interviews early in the 5th year. For a reason I do not now recall, the Deputy Head Teacher I mentioned earlier conducted my interview. My parents and I had always assumed that from school I would go to University, so I had assumed that

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my career chat would provide guidance for me in doing that. To my surprise the advice given was that I seemed to have the potential to be a good buyer for Marks and Spencer. I was completely disorientated by this advice. "Why?" "What did she know about me that made her come to this conclusion?" I recalled that in our previous conversation she had said that I was not suited to the only practical subject I did. I did not do art, dressmaking or home design so why did she think I should do that. I was puzzled that she had not automatically assumed that I would want to go on to University. Throughout my career in that school I had received many awards for my academic performance, and in each exam I came first, second or third in most subjects. I was doing 8 GCE's and teachers were not expressing concerns about my performance to my parents. I dealt with this in the way I had learnt to deal with difficult things. I decided to ignore her opinion. I thought that in an objective system if I got the O' level grades I would be sure to get a university place and I decided not to worry about their views.

My parents and I had concerns about my ability to achieve my potential but for different reasons. From a child I had been prone to asthma and since arriving in England it had got progressively worse. By the fifth year it had got to a stage that I was at school for two weeks and then at home for two weeks. The medication I was being given was not helping very much. I was very motivated to achieve and with the help of a very dear friend I was maintaining my grades. Sylvia brought the homework to me at the end of each day and then collected it and took it in to school next day. This system continued right through school even up to 'A' level when we were doing different subjects.

Throughout my life illness has featured strongly and has been one of the influencing factors, as I look back I am aware of how serendipitous the getting of good health care may be. Around the age of 16 /17 the family GP died, and we had to find a new doctor. Very soon he became concerned about the frequency of my asthma attacks, and was not willing to continue prescribing the medication that I had been receiving to date. He felt that I needed to have tests done and sent me to the local chest clinic to have a series of examinations and made an appointment for me to see a consultant. For the first time someone outside of my family was not simply accepting of the fact that I had asthma. Within a few visits, the consultant determined that my asthma was allergy based and with preventative actions and new medication my life was radically changed. By the last year of 'A' levels, asthma attacks were becoming irregular and my image of my self as a person with a disability was beginning to turn around.

School was not all about indifferent teachers with low expectations. There were also teachers such as my History and Economics teachers to whom I owe a great deal. In the sixth year, at a time when still coping with the disabling effects of asthma, and feeling the strain of doing three 'A' levels I wanted to give up History, because of the amount of work it involved. However my History Teacher expressed strong belief in my ability and joined my friend Sylvia in persuading me that if I had got that far despite illness, I could continue and successfully finish.

My Economics teacher appointed himself as my personal career adviser, and set out to try to help me out of the depressed disorientated state I got into after applying for University and getting no offers. I had gained more than the required 5 'O' levels for a University place and had anticipated that I would at least have been interviewed by

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the establishments to which I had applied. I was extremely confused by being consistently refused and also I had not considered doing anything else after school. Fortunately this teacher recognised the inertia that had overtaken me and set about getting me to make new plans for leaving school. For quite a while it seemed that he did all the work. Each Monday morning he would arrive with information about another job that I might apply for, but on most occasions I did not see myself in those jobs. Finally there were two that I could see myself in. I remember the words that led me to apply for the Post Office and the Civil Service. He assured me that I should be "all right there", and he mentioned the names of two other Black girls who had been two or three years ahead of me at school. He said that one had gone into the Civil Service and the other had got a job in the Post Office. With this I wrote off for application forms and applied to both. The Civil Service job came through first. I applied, had an examination and an interview and was accepted as an Executive Officer.

I knew that my father would have been disappointed if I gave up on my plans for University, so I decided to take that job for a while and to apply for University the next year, with my A' level grades in hand. As it turned out I never did apply again.

## **Reflective Sense-making**

**Themes and issues emerging from this experience are:**

- **Low teacher expectation**

There is such a disjunction between my performance throughout the school, and the Deputy Head Teacher's appraisal of me and of my future prospects. She had never taught me, and she had no first-hand experience of me, so her assessment must have been made on another basis. Was her assessment based on information gained from teachers who taught me? If so, why did they not see me as someone likely to go on to University? I was a student who consistently got high grades so on what was that assessment made? On what information was her assessment of my suitability for a career in fashion made?

Whatever her reasons, her assessment sent me clear messages that the school did not rate my academic ability. This conflicted with the information given at prize-giving ceremonies, and on my school reports. It also raises questions about what support was given to my University application?

The creation of this conflict had a negative effect on me. It produced an alienation from the academic system. I began to tell myself that I did not value qualifications anyway. I began to see the label of 'academic' only in negative terms. I started to identify myself as a 'practical person', - which I now realise is the interjection of the message sent to me by that Deputy Head Teacher, whose name I will have to think hard to remember! She gave a powerful message. Although at the time I thought that I had rejected her ideas, I can now see that they were internalised.

Recent research (Mirza 1992) indicates that it is not unusual for teachers' expectations of, and career advice to, Black girls to be at odds with their own and their parents expectations, and with their academic performance. I wish I had known that then. Might I have dealt with this experience differently had I known that it was not just about me?

- **Alienation from the educational system** Reflecting on the period after the rejections of my applications for university places I can now see that I was somewhat depressed. In my teens I was self-motivating, challenges often made me more

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determined to overcome them. But returning to that period I realise that my usual resourcefulness was absent, and I am struck by the fact that there was not a formal system for picking up children like myself.

Having had my formal career interview about a year previously I was offered no further formal help. I am grateful for the interest of my Economics teacher and his willingness to go beyond his role and to persist in helping me think about what I could now do and in helping me find a job, despite my disinterest. However, I am concerned that it was left to the goodwill of an individual teacher. Why was there not formal career support for me following rejection from university? Did the dissonance between the expectations of the school, and those of my parents and myself obscure my need for help? Might it be that the school assumed that my parents and I were not seriously expecting me to continue on to university and that we had been planning my entry into the world of work upon the closure of my career at school, or did they simply did not care? It illustrates to me how without formal career structures children from families who do not know the system well could easily lose their way.

- **Lack of adequate support in dealing with the effects of illness / disability**

The theme of illness recurs throughout my life, and I pick it up again later. However in this instance I am struck by the poor support I received in dealing with the disabling effects of asthma during my teenage years.

Firstly, I received such low level of medical care. For many years it was simply a matter of regular visits to the doctor to have my prescription filled. It seems to me that I was affected by an overlay of race and class. The options for medical help and advice open to my parents were severely restricted due to financial constraints. It was not easy to either establish the effectiveness of your doctor in the National Health Service so it was difficult to assess the quality of the care we were receiving. My parents believed that I could be helped but did not know how to get that help. Discussing this with my mother recently, she told me that at that time they had not known that they could request a referral to a consultant. With the change of doctor we suddenly realised what poor service we had received for so many years.

Secondly, I am noticing that my parents were active players in my struggle with asthma and its disabling effects, except with regard to school. I do not think that it occurred to them that they might intervene there. Perhaps this was related to the fact that my parents came from a culture where teachers took full responsibility for the educational needs of the child and where parents' intervention was seen as interference - unless requested by the school. I suspect that this was at play here.

Whatever the reasons the result was that the problem of how to manage asthma and school was sorted out between Sylvia, my best friend, and me. One day during her regular visits after school, whenever I was ill, she said "I really want to help, what can I do?" I immediately knew, and we spent the following weeks perfecting a system that allowed her to help. The two areas in which I most needed help were firstly to access the library - I was an avid reader, and reading was something I could do in bed - and secondly stay abreast of schoolwork. I will always be extremely grateful to Sylvia for her help, but I am concerned that there was not a formal system between school and home to facilitate my studies during periods of disability. Again my success depended on an informal system and of the goodwill of an individual. Without her consistent support it is unlikely that I would have attained any 'O' or 'A' levels, not because of lack of ability or motivation but simply because there was not a structure to enable me to receive tuition while at home. In retrospect it seems incredible to me that despite the fact that in some years I was absent for a substantial proportion of the school year the only expressed concern was to ensure that sick notes were duly received. This is yet another example of the way in which disadvantage is perpetuated through the presence or absence of structures.

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Taylor et al (1995) with their stories of adolescent girls indicate that it is not uncommon for girls around the ages of 15 plus to become more and more isolated, and to feel that they have to cope with problems on their own. They suggest that as girls learn the dangers of speaking so they also become afraid to connect with others and learn how to be silent. They close down on their need for connection, and become more and more self-sufficient. In doing that they put at risk their psychological health as they close off routes for expression of feelings. They disconnect from their own vulnerability and from their need for contact with others. These issues feature in the explorations of our Collaborative Inquiry group and I return to them in Section 3.

- **Problemised and excluded by the system**

Reflecting on my teenage years it seems that I/ we were taught in many ways that we were problems to be observed, managed and excluded. These lessons were given to us in a variety of ways and by different parts of the system.

***The Police System*** The lived experience of police harassment of male members of my family has created in me a negative perception of the police force. It has created deep feelings of distrust, cynicism and it has alienated me from that aspect of the system. As I reflect I realise that the impact of the lessons learnt in those early years are far reaching. On various occasions, I have been offered consultancy or training work with different police forces and each time I have declined.

Of course, my disassociation from this aspect of the system has not only been created by my family's experiences. Over the years it has been reinforced by first hand observation of police brutality during the arrest of more than one Black person, and third-hand reports (from social networks and newspapers) of the unexplained deaths of Black men in custody, particularly in police cells. As I write this I am becoming aware of a deep anger inside that has not been properly expressed, and that blocks me from feeling able to seek the creation of a new and more positive relationship with the police system. At the moment I remain alienated from it.

Again, I am noticing the mirroring of the same image. To the police, Black people are a problem and to me, the police are a problem. What would need to happen for me to establish a more productive relationship with that part of the system? What are the possibilities for change?

### ***The Immigration System***

My story raises the issue of national identity. It illustrates the disruption of self-identity that took place when the Immigration Acts 1968 and 1971 so radically changed the status of people born in the British Colonies. In changing the basis of British citizenship from birth in Britain or a British Colony to one grandparent born in Britain, I was made an 'Alien' and alienated. These acts and Acts finally removed any illusions of bonding and kinship between Britain and the people it colonised. It laid bare the basis of our relationship. Bateson (1972) says:

*"The relationship is immanent in [the] message." The message received by me was that we had been of use, but that we no longer were, so ties between us were being severed. Illusions of Britain as the 'mother country' were blown."*

The changing of national identity was, I believe, an act that has had reverberating impact on me. I have moved past the initial anger and my small acts of resistance, and until this thesis, I have not thought about what this has meant to me, yet I feel that it has been incredibly important. I now carry a British passport but I do not feel British, and others do not perceive

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me as British. Bateson (1972) says that if the pathology inherent in double binding processes can be "warded off or resisted, the total experience may promote creativity",

As I explored and inquired into my experiences I became conscious of the numbers of double binding situations that emerged from the various contexts in which I have resided. Over the years I have struggled to find ways of warding off and resisting the pathology inherent in the double bind, and of identifying ways to promote creativity and growth. So later in the thesis I return to some of these issues,

- **Feelings of confusion as indicators of the experience of indirect and covert discrimination**

As I reviewed my life I noticed that in those youthful days at school, when I did not have a conceptual frame for understanding or identifying covert discrimination, such experiences caused a disorientating, and confusing disturbance. It produced incidents that my mind could not make sense of, and simply stored for years. I am amazed at how vivid some of these incidents have remained, and at how easily the feelings that surrounded them – confusion, resentment, anger, disillusionment, pain – flood back. At that time I seemed only to be able to identify incidents of direct discrimination. Those clearly derogatory statements made about Black people by church members, rare incidents of name-calling, or where other Black people were being clearly treated unfairly or negatively, though difficult, were identifiable and therefore comparatively easy to deal with. Those where I sensed discrimination but could not identify it were more difficult for me. Incidents such as my school friends' insistence that I must have come from the USA, the Deputy Head Teacher's assumption that I would make a good buyer for Marks and Spencer and the Domestic Science Teacher's prediction that I would find the theoretical aspect of the course difficult were problematic. They were all situations where I *felt* discrimination, even though I could not objectively state how and why those behaviours were racist.

Objectively analysing such situations it seems that my subjective knowing was hard to articulate because the assumptions on which the statements or behaviours were based were hidden. It suggests that my feelings of confusion sprang from an experience of the disjunction between the perceived behaviour and my understanding of the general norms of the context. Therefore, as a student whose academic performance had been repeatedly rewarded, I could not understand why I was not identified as potential university material. Nor could I put together being perceived as a practical person with a flair for fashion, when I did not do any of the subjects that may have led to the reaching of such conclusions. However, if in the moment the disjunctions could have been easily identified it might have been possible for me to challenge or to speak to someone (maybe my parents) about such incidents.

In practice, they were not. The meanings of the exchanges were not accessible to me at an intellectual, verbal level. It seems that these conflicting messages were gathered and perceived at a level below consciousness. In retrospect I am able to identify the disjunctive messages, but I do not think that I was aware of this information for many years. Nevertheless those encounters created feelings of mistrust, unhappiness, and / or confusion. In some cases they communicated to me that I was not valued, sometimes that I was not liked, or that I was not being treated fairly. The disjunction was *felt* rather than analysed. This makes it very difficult to talk about such experiences. What do you say? How do you begin to communicate a feeling? In the context of a dominant system where objective analysis is valued and feelings are denigrated, how do we make constructive interventions?

- **Choosing to stay silent**

In addition to the difficulty of articulating a feeling, there are also issues of power and risk in such situations. How does a young girl confront, challenge or inquire into the contradictions she perceives in her Deputy Head Teacher's statements? What are the risks of voicing her feelings that she is being unfairly treated? Until this encounter I had liked this teacher. There were few teachers who were generally labelled as "not liking Black people" – my Domestic

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Science teacher was one of them! So except for a very small minority I liked them all and therefore I did not anticipate discriminatory actions from them. Women in Essed's research (1991) talked about the "kind of sixth sense that you need to suspect something ... to believe that whoever it is not going to have your total welfare in mind." Essed says:

*"One of the persistent themes in the interviews is the problem of covert racism [it...] is experienced as intangible and seems difficult to prove."*

The absence of overt racism in the school made it hard for me to trust my subjective feelings. As I wrote that last sentence, into my mind flowed a story that should have been told, but has not been. From this story I realised that even when racism was overt and observable it was not easy for me to speak of it. When I was in the first year of the sixth form my school went from a Grammar to a Comprehensive School and with that change in status came new policies and systems. One of these was the active encouragement of all children to broaden their education and interests. On Wednesday afternoons children from the third to lower sixth forms were required to engage with a subject of a different type to those normally studied. Those normally occupied with academic subjects were required to take a practical subject, and vice versa. These were 'non-exam' lessons to which you were required to commit a minimum of two terms. I welcomed this as an opportunity to learn to type. My parents had encouraged me to think that it was helpful to have easily marketable skills.

However, my typing lessons were a real disappointment. Within a few weeks I had grown to hate the lesson, and wanted to leave. There were only two black girls in the class and we received a disproportionately high degree of negative attention from the teacher. She would call our names from the front of the class and give us instructions in ways that communicated that she thought that we were stupid. She often stood over us and hit our knuckles with a ruler. A result of his negative attention I gave typing up as soon as possible, and carried for many years after a block towards learning to type. I still cannot touch type and the writing of this thesis would have been made much easier had I established a different relationship with this skill.

This is an incident in which I was able to name the experience, yet neither my friend nor I spoke to our parents about it. We managed the situation by withdrawing from the class as soon as possible. I wonder what made it hard for us to acknowledge and talk about it? In the context of my own family, some possible contributing factors come to mind:

1. We had not identified the school as being a site for racism. Generally speaking, we did quite well there. My brother was made Deputy Head Boy and my youngest sister became Head girl. Perhaps the fact that we were doing well in the school made it difficult to identify it as a place in which racist incidents occurred. I observe a tendency to want to make things either one thing or another. It was either a good or bad school. It was racist or it was not.
2. I am also wondering if it was about shame and pain. Perhaps it was simply the difficulty of speaking about this type of abuse. I don't remember my brothers and sisters talking about discrimination in our school. Was I the only one to have such experiences? This seems unlikely. We acknowledged racial prejudice in our church. This was talked about but not in the school. Why was this?
3. Most of the incidents recalled took place when I was on the brink of adulthood. Maybe there were feelings of independence, and I felt that I had taken care of the situations and there was no need to involve my parents. In all of the situations I dealt with them by denying their significance, negating the perpetrators and the setting, and by withdrawing. In doing this I was left to cope with these situations in whatever way I was able to at that time. I have not yet learnt to touch type, and for many years I avoided further and higher education, and the actors have remained unaware of these actions. So those responses were satisfactory in the short-term but costly in the longer-term.

*Process reflection*

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*I am observing how difficult I find it to reflect on these issues. Despite the years of personal work I have done it still proves to be extremely difficult for me to fully engage with some aspects of my life experiences and to inquire into them. An impatient inner voice advises that I should not try to identify the reasons but simply accept that it was hard. I noticed a similar difficulty when reflecting on my alienation from certain aspects of the system. I am still frightened of entering into many of these 'places'. I am frightened of the knowledge that might emerge. I am not confident of my ability to handle that knowledge. Is this the same anxiety that caused my mother and others to counsel us not to think about these experiences, but simply to think of the people as ignorant and then put the incidents behind us?*

- **The recognition and naming of Discrimination**

The naming of discrimination – even when it is overt seems such a difficult process that I will remain with it a little longer. The ability to recognise and name discrimination is critically important if we are to be able to interrupt discrimination in our everyday lives - in others and our own behaviours. It is at this stage that the first possibilities of change occur. Yet my experience indicates that this is a difficult process. It is made problematic when:

- A situation (e.g. my school and church) is perceived to be both very good, positive and affirming, and also negating and oppressive.
- Family, friends or people I love and care for and experience as loving and caring for me, openly expressing racist views. It creates great confusion and pain in the mind. It is difficult to know how to think about them. To be able to name their behaviour as racist I had to reach a place of understanding that people could be kind and supportive to me while at the same time holding and expressing racist views and undertaking racist acts. I had not reached that point of development at that time of some of these early experiences, so the naming of racism in many areas of my social context was difficult.
- Friends make racist comments in my presence and I am faced with the painful awareness that either I am not being seen fully by disassociate or 'bracket me off' from other Black people.

Essed (1991) states that the identification of racism - particularly covert racism - is a very complex process. She says that it demands:

- "a. Generalisations about specific types of racist episodes (scenarios of racism). and
- b. Abstract cognition about the processes and mechanisms of racism (abstract knowledge of racism)?

She asserts that:

*"Like any other form of political knowledge, information about racism is communicated through formal and informal channels. Formal channels include the mass media, the education system and literature [...] informal information systems include family, friends, colleagues and other informal networks."*

Applying Essed's ideas to my own situation it does not seem surprising that I could not recognise and name the disjunctions I was experiencing. Coming from the Caribbean I had had less exposure to racial discrimination, and my informal systems had not prepared me with the concepts for the identification of covert discrimination in the education system. At that time I had no access to the formal channels of information described by Essed – no media, books or training that developed in me a conceptual framework for being able to make sense of these confusing experiences.

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Essed's research (1991) indicated that some Black women were not always able to recognise covert racism when it was encountered. She suggests that this may be due to the "disconnection of contemporary racism from the historical experience of Black people under Dutch colonisation". She indicates the need to understand the impact of colonization on the development of the knowledge of racism. This is an important, related, though not central issue in my concern to understand how we learn to thrive, so for the time being it is a thread that I must leave and perhaps pick up again in section 3.

## **Closing Remarks**

As I reviewed the formative years, soon after arriving in Britain when I was struggling to make sense of what it meant to be Black woman in Britain, many themes have arisen. Some I have picked up and examined more closely seeking to identify its nature and composition. Others such as – the experience of re-establishing our family after six years separation; learning about the construction of gender and about the specific experience of being Black woman – though not picked up in this thesis are equally worthy of examination. Many of the themes raised here recur in other cycles of the inquiry.

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