

# Autumn Divas: Reflections of Two Women of Color Who Achieved Doctorates after Age 50

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**Abstract:** This article shares the personal narratives of two of its authors who refer to themselves as Autumn Divas—women of color who achieved doctorate degrees after the age of 50. These narratives reveal the women’s motivation for returning to pursue a doctorate after significant professional and life experiences, the challenges they faced while doing so, the support they received, and how they plan to use their new voices to influence positive change. Recommendations for future research seek to inspire women to pursue their goals regardless of their life stage.

**Keywords:** women’s empowerment, women doctoral studies, mature women of color

Phenomenal women of a certain age have been known to set goals for themselves that some consider to be overly ambitious and even unrealistic. The pursuit of a doctorate degree requires determination, energy, commitment, sacrifice, flexibility, and faith. For women of color, this journey is noteworthy because of their willingness to take on academic challenges and tests of fortitude at a time when some of their peers are retiring, looking forward to fewer demands on their time, and longing to leave an environment that has been difficult and, at times, oppressive. It is also remarkable in that it establishes a new path after significant life experiences, a self-motivated journey toward a new voice, and new means of building on the strengths of their communities.

This article employs a qualitative case study method, which Fries-Britt and Kelly (2005) state represents a holistic approach to examining a phenomenon. The personal narratives of two of the authors will be used to explore the motivation and challenges experienced, the support received, and plans for using their voices to influence change. As Baxter and Jack (2008) suggest, we hope to inform both clinical- and policy-oriented helping systems as well as higher education programs and to answer some of the “how” and “why” questions within relevant contexts (Yin, 2003).

In order to offer context for the population, the following information provides a depiction of the proportion of doctoral recipients who are women of color. The National Science Foundation (2016) reports that the number of doctorates conferred in 2015 was 55,006, and of that total, 25,403—or 46% of the recipients—were women, approximately 16% of whom were women of color. In terms of age distribution, 10.2% of the women receiving doctorates were in the over-45 age group. Of the women in the over-45 age group, 9.8% were Latino, 22.3% were Black or African American, 26.4% were American Indian, and 7.8% identified as more than one race. It is interesting to note that over 66% of women doctoral recipients in the over-45 age group are women of color when they comprise a very small percentage (3%) of doctoral recipients overall.

The literature suggests that women, regardless of their age groups, often carry child care and other family and domestic responsibilities that serve as barriers to their commitment to scholarly pursuits (Castro, Garcia, Cavazos, & Castro, 2011; Francois, 2014; Onwuegbuzie, Rosli, Ingram,

& Frels, 2014). Moreover, African Americans were more likely to succeed in doctoral programs when they had family support (McCallum, 2016). For African Americans, McCallum (2016) describes educational achievement as an opportunity to be a role model and acknowledge those who paved the way.

### **Personal Narratives**

We decided that our personal narratives would reflect our inspiration, our motivation, the support received, the challenges experienced, and what our message would be to other Autumn Divas who may choose to embark on a similar journey. We have also met several women whom we have identified as Autumn Divas since we started this article. We hope they will find a sense of affirmation of their own journeys of rediscovery and generativity through the specific areas we have chosen to focus on.

### **Why Did We Decide to Pursue a Doctorate at This Time in Our Lives?**

#### **Dana**

For quite some time—at least 20 years—I have had the goal of teaching full-time at the end of my career. I believed that I had attained valuable knowledge over the course of my professional life, and I wanted to use that knowledge to enhance the education of social work students. I had experience in direct services as an individual, family, and group counselor, as a supervisor and administrator in public social services, and as a national program director, regional director, and vice president of a national child advocacy organization. I believed that this background would provide an enriched and inspiring ability to teach social work students within the context of real organizational environments.

My journey into teaching began as an adjunct professor teaching a night class on child welfare to Bachelor of Social Work students. In this role, I found that I was able to provide examples from my own experiences of most any situation or challenge covered in the textbook or theories we studied in class. I served as a field supervisor for a dozen or more social work students at the bachelor's and master's levels in my full-time job; but again, that only began to address my interests in becoming an educator. Finally, in 2005 I made the decision to not pursue a doctorate. Although I wanted the experience of being a full-time, tenure-track professor, which required a doctorate, I believed that after working 30 years, it was too late for me.

I found myself in a senior-level position professionally, with challenging and stimulating responsibilities and great professional relationships, but I still sought something more. I was barely able to explore what that meant when I received the disturbing news that I had breast cancer. I had to step back from my 12-hour workdays and focus on my recovery. I had to go through an intensive treatment of surgery, chemotherapy, and radiation therapy. I was fortunate to have a very loving and supportive family who helped me immensely. I had my faith, excellent medical care, good insurance, and, ultimately, a good prognosis. What I didn't have was all of my brain power. I pushed forward to meet all of my responsibilities but did so with a foggy viewpoint and bewildering confusion. It turns out that while there is an increasing survival rate

in breast cancer patients with systemic chemotherapy, there are sometimes losses in cognitive functioning, which is termed “chemobrain” (Inagaki et al., 2006). I asked my oncologist about this fogginess, and he told me about chemobrain and reassured me that it was temporary, but he was not able to give me an idea of how long it would last. He said it was different for everyone. I knew that I had trouble concentrating, and I was more worried about that than other aspects of my recovery. I took the summer off, rested, swam, grumbled about the limits of unemployment insurance, spent time on my hobby of art jewelry, and worried. Eventually, the fog lifted, and I embraced with clarity the value of my intellectual abilities and knew that I would never take that for granted.

I accepted a position at a school of social work in an urban university on the East Coast as director of student affairs and admissions. I was an administrator with the opportunity to interact with prospective students and current students and participate on the leadership council for the school of social work. Perhaps it was fortuitous that I was encouraged by the dean of the school to sit in on a PhD dissertation defense, and this is where my interest in earning a doctorate was sparked once again. The idea of engaging in new research and adding to the body of knowledge used in class was enticing. I also wanted to put my brain to good use.

Reflecting on my experience in social work, I felt that although I made a valuable contribution, most of my time in the field was a blur of rushing from one project to the next. I believed that moving into academia would provide the opportunity to take the time to think and reflect on better approaches to providing services to people as well as advocating for positive change in legislation, policy, and program development. The idea of pursuing a doctorate was also enhanced by the information that, as an employee of the university, I was eligible for tuition remission. I talked with the chair of our PhD department, and she encouraged me and even stated that she thought I would be able to handle a full-time course schedule. Most of our PhD students worked full-time as I did. After talking with a few members of the faculty, one of whom was also pursuing her doctorate at a mature age, I decided to take the leap and apply for admission. On my next oncologist visit, when the doctor explained to his intern that I had re-invented myself, I knew that I was on my way.

## **Linda**

My desire to teach began very early in my life. I knew I wanted to teach when I was playing with dolls, lining them up classroom-style and reading to them, asking them questions, and determining who was doing well and who might need help. My examples of educators came from two family members who were teachers, both of whom I admired. However, when asked by family members and friends of my parents what grade I wanted to teach, I was clear it would not be elementary, junior high, or high school. I wanted to teach at a college. Interestingly, my career choice was not education but social work. My entire academic career was focused on social work, so I began to believe becoming an educator was not really in my future. While pursuing my master’s degree, I had an instructor who asked me if I had given any thought to pursuing a doctorate degree. Once again, the educator’s spark was lit. However, the delay in pursuing the doctorate degree can be attributed to life events. I was completing my Master of Social Work degree and felt there was no real financial support for me to further my education,

and although I was blessed to not have the burdens of loans after graduate school, I felt returning to work was what I needed to do. I had to work to live. At the time of my graduate school graduation, I had no examples of African American PhDs before me which could have motivated me to move forward.

My career as a social worker took me into a larger medical and mental health arena, where I have worked for over 24 years. I have had the opportunity to practice in community-based mental health centers, in a large mental health hospital, in tertiary care facilities, and in private practice. I have experienced working with liver and kidney transplant patients and trained as a palliative and end-of-life care specialist. I participated on a hospital-wide ethics board for several years and helped to develop a pre- and post-transplant support organization. I have trained medical clerical staff, supervised social work students, and served as a clinical interventionist on major research studies under the guidance of a world-renowned epidemiologist. All of these experiences served to keep the desire to move into the educator's realm alive. I knew I had a great deal to offer students interested in the profession of social work; however, I was unsure of how to move in that direction. The dream remained alive and was closer to becoming more real than I knew.

The opportunity to teach a course at Morgan State University as an adjunct instructor presented itself, and I gladly accepted it. It was not only invigorating; it became the bellows which caused the embers to truly ignite the teaching dream. It was almost magical as I helped students make connections between theory and practice come alive in the classroom from my years of clinical experience. During a brief discussion with the dean about qualifications for teaching at the university, I learned that I would need to acquire a PhD. Reflecting on my conversation with the professor who suggested I pursue a doctorate, I realized that I was now 13 years older and a homeowner with a responsible demanding job and community commitments. Hmm, what should I do?

I believe nothing happens by coincidence, and I was about to read a book given to the members of our entire church by our pastor entitled *The Dream Giver*, authored by Bruce Wilkerson. It is a parable about pursuing and achieving one's dreams in the face of all obstacles: obstacles which include your own fears and self-doubts and obstacles which could help you to develop the tenacity and perseverance to achieve your dreams. I realized that if I was going to achieve the dream placed in my soul so many years ago, it was now or never.

A few years earlier I attended a university to complete a post-graduate certificate in end-of-life care, and I knew if I had the opportunity to pursue my doctoral studies, that was where I would want to go. While on that beautiful campus I experienced a spiritual moment which opened my heart and mind for the next steps in my life. In 2006, off I went to attend the doctoral program's open house. I did not inform anyone because I did not want to be talked out of this before I fully knew what "this" was. When I returned home, I completed the application, submitted it, and waited. Within three weeks I received a letter accepting me into the program for the upcoming academic year. I was elated, energized, and scared. Here was the moment I hoped for, dreamed about, and anticipated. I was returning to school to pursue a PhD at the ripe young age of 56. I had no precedent for this experience, no example, and no mentor—just my dream and my faith.

## **What Was Our Experience Informing Family and Friends, and What Was Their Response?**

### **Dana**

I talked with a close girlfriend about my plans and was surprised when she reminded me that I had always wanted to do this. She told me that I first mentioned this plan to her 30 years beforehand. This was my friend with whom I shared both personal and professional views and goals. We worked together off and on, we got married a year apart, we had children at the same time, we shared the challenge of caring for aging parents, and we both entered the phase of parenthood with adult children, yet I was surprised that I had told her about this dream so long ago. She encouraged me without hesitation, saying that our desires are even more important as we age. I was reluctant to mention it to my husband at first because I already had a master's degree and he had expressed an interest in pursuing one (in my mind it was his turn). It seems that I was projecting my priorities onto him; however, I was the one ready to be a student again. He cheered me on and pledged his support for the endeavor, but neither of us really had an understanding of what it would entail. Later, after witnessing me spend untold hours at my computer, he joked to our friends that he would "just slide a piece of chicken under the door every once in a while" and leave me alone. My children, who were adults (in fact, my daughter was in graduate school while working full-time), received the news positively as well. My daughter and I would trade war stories about sources and citations, and my son would make sure that I took time to eat and sleep, reminding me that I am still a cancer survivor needing fuel and rest.

My most intimate friends and family (including many teachers on both my side of the family and my husband's and friends who had witnessed me take the past 10 years to complete an art jewelry certificate) celebrated the benefits of being a lifetime learner. Another close friend and I decided to go back to school to prepare for a new journey before we retired. We wrote recommendation letters for each other and encouraged each other to proceed. However, for those who I casually knew or worked with, the news was met first with stunned silence and then, "What? Why in the world would you do that? Are you crazy? You should be thinking about retirement!" These reactions were not helped by the fact that I would not be available for many social events and wouldn't have more than a few minutes for conversation. There was little sympathy for my plight of having so many assignments and needing to study—to them, those were young people's challenges.

Some of my colleagues at work were incredulous that I would pursue my PhD in social work at the school where I was working full-time. They thought that it would make more sense to go to another school or department so that I wouldn't have to interact with the same people while "wearing a different hat." I learned to do this with some difficulty, as some of my colleagues advised me that my plan wouldn't end well. I had to learn to compartmentalize and approach the same faculty members as colleagues by day and as my professors by night. I made sure that I approached each class as a student rather than as a "seasoned" professional, and I put forward the clear message that I was there to learn. I offered my perspectives in class, as we all did, but did not by any means know all there was to know about the topic at hand. In fact, I talked about

how good it was to learn about the new research as I had been in graduate school decades ago. I was also constantly aware that I was in a fishbowl, feeling that I could not allow myself to fail because everyone was watching.

I must make the important point that I was in a historically black college/university (HBCU), and the environment of nurturing and supporting students permeated all levels, including the PhD program. HBCUs generally include a commitment to support and empower diverse students and an obligation to uplift the community in their mission and vision statements. The culture of the campus often includes a priority to build the students' social and ethical training and experience as well as their academic advancement. This made a significant difference for me. Even though I was an experienced professional, the pursuit of a doctorate encompasses enough emotional highs and lows, time-related crises, unpacking of previously-held notions of expertise, and the need to let go of trying to control every aspect of the learning process (or your life); therefore, the support offered by the faculty for an African American woman seeking a PhD was welcomed and very much needed.

### **Linda**

Upon my return from the university's open house, I contacted my mother and informed her. I shared my dream with her, and her response was to ask what was stopping me. She knew what I desired to do, and she was all in. My father, on the other hand, wanted to know if I had thought it through, what it would mean for me financially, and how I would manage work, the demands of school at this level, and keeping my head above water. In what was a false sense of self-assurance, I told him that it would all work out. Here I was, a fully-grown woman, and I was explaining to my father how I would manage my life as a doctoral student! In all honesty, I did not know how I would manage, but my faith kicked in, and I believed that if this was meant to be, God was going to provide what I needed every step of the way.

I completed the application process and submitted it a week late. There was still a part of me that wanted the assurance that this was what I was supposed to do. I received a reply in record time, accepting and welcoming me as a doctoral student in the School of Social Work Class of 2007. I was elated!

Now I had to inform my director at the hospital and my supervisor. The director was happy for me, concerned about coverage, and seemingly supportive of my decision and opportunity. My supervisor was sarcastic and not very amenable to the idea, suggesting that perhaps I was experiencing a mid-life crisis and should do like she did and just purchase a vacation condo and chill. My response, equally sarcastic, was that I already had one, and so I decided my decision was now final.

Friends and colleagues were excited for me. They actually planned a surprise party for me and brought me gifts to fashion my dorm room. I was prepared to enter a new and exciting next phase of my life, and I was excitedly petrified.

### **What Were the Challenges and Barriers, and How Were They Managed?**

## **Dana**

The idea of returning to school after so many years was a challenge in itself. I graduated with my Master of Social Work degree in 1978—34 years before starting the PhD program. I was not sure of my ability to focus for the sustained amount of time required for such advanced study. This notion was complicated by the fact that I was a recent breast cancer survivor. It had only been one year since I had completed my treatments. Chemotherapy had taken a devastating toll on me, and I was just regaining my strength and my perspective. I am generally an optimist, but this situation had shaken me to the core. I was back to working full-time, but I was in a relatively new position and new environment, and I was worried about my stamina on the one hand and whether I would be taken seriously on the other hand. I was also concerned that I would not be seen favorably in comparison with much younger applicants. Additionally, since I was involved in graduate admissions, I was aware of a level of skepticism by some faculty members as to why older applicants sought PhDs. Did they just want the initials behind their names? What would they do with it? An invitation to attend a dissertation defense was the impetus that I needed. It was powerful to witness an emerging scholar committed to a topic and expanding his horizons as a researcher and educator. My connection to the PhD candidate was not his dissertation per se, as the topic was very different from my area of interest. What impressed me was the fact that he embraced the process and was able to fully explain the importance of his research to the profession and to the community, how the research was conducted, what theories the research was based on, what the findings were, and what implications they had for the future. As someone who envisioned myself as a professor, this was an aha moment for me. When I connected the degree to a person, rather than just seeing a lofty goal, it made it seem more attainable and it instilled a belief that I could do it too.

Once my journey began as a full-time PhD student, I had what I considered to be normal challenges: handling full-time work responsibilities along with the reading and writing assignments, comprehending and applying statistical analysis techniques, taking comprehensive exams, and navigating other school-related trials. The sheer volume of work was overwhelming. I thought I understood that initially, but there is nothing like living the experience. It seems that there are no “normal challenges.” Everyone has unique life experiences, and their relationship with their journey to achieve a doctorate is distinctive.

I told myself that I had an advantage due to having adult children, and I believe that to be true, but the flip side is that I was more prone to fatigue and less likely to be able to stay up late and produce coherent products. Moreover, I was far less able to remember theories and concepts from my Master of Social Work program than my colleagues who had only three to five years since their master’s studies, and my sources were ancient in academic time frames.

A major factor that helped in managing the challenges was the connection with my cohort. The chairperson of the PhD program explained that we were not in competition with each other, and we were encouraged to work together. There were six of us who started the program together, and we became more than an assembly of fellow students. Instead, we formed a group that supported each other in pursuing a common goal. This mutual support system turned out to be

invaluable not only in the completion of challenging assignments successfully but in facing personal and professional barriers and working to overcome them in order to remain in the program and achieve our ultimate goals. Although we had a sizable age range, we were African American PhD students, all of whom had significant professional experience. Our areas of expertise were diverse, and we were able to help each other with the various clinical and policy perspectives on the subject matter we were studying, and the group had the opportunity to take advantage of the knowledge of its individual members. When one of us experienced times of frustration and uncertainty, the others would respond with a listening ear, providing understanding and encouragement to move forward. We formed a study group to prepare for the comprehensive exams, and we critiqued each other as we prepared for our proposal defenses. In the end, we all graduated within a year of one another and celebrated accomplishments together.

### **Linda**

Here I was, a 56-year-old in school—not just any school but one of the premier “Seven Sisters Ivy League Universities.” Oh my! My mind was racing. I made requests of friends to water my plants, care for my two Siamese cats, and take in my mail. I was off on a life-changing journey. Attending a predominately white institution (PWI) was not unusual for me. I had attended PWIs my entire academic career: one of the state universities in New York as an undergraduate and a large urban university in Virginia as a graduate student. The difference was that I had not lived on campus; I always had my own residence, and I did not have to share my space. I was going to meet the cohort I would take this journey with, and I was anxious. My good friend at the time drove to New England with me. The car was packed like an undergrad going off to college for the first time. I was headed to a place I had visited only once before to spend eight weeks in residence with a group of strangers. What had I gotten myself into? The questions rolling around in my head were numerous and my nerves were on edge. I could not get there fast enough. This was a seven-hour drive. The day was beautiful and the scenery heading to the New England states was breathtaking. We talked, but I do not recall our conversations. I was focused on getting there and meeting with my cohort. Once we arrived in town, we checked into the hotel and I headed to the campus.

The university had one of the most idyllic campuses I had ever seen, so I was excited to do this program for eight weeks in the summer—June to August with one break in July. I arrived on campus, picked up my registration and housing materials, reviewed the agenda for the weekend, and located the residence where the doctoral students would stay. Our cohort met later that day for brunch at the home of one of the co-directors of the doctoral program. This was exciting yet scary. I felt like the main character in the parable presented in *The Dream Giver* (Wilkerson, 2003). Ordinary was his name and he left the land of familiar to enter into the unknown, with only the direction of the Dream Giver (Wilkerson, 2003). My spiritual ears were tuned, and I observed everything and everyone around me for signs of anything that smacked of racism, ageism, or any negative energy. Much to my surprise and relief, I did not encounter any of that. So, I was off on my adventure, becoming a student again, getting my head into the process, and securing my space. Space is very important to me. It supports and comforts me, and during this journey it was important that my space held me safely like a nest, allowing me to focus and produce during the next 2 ½ years that I had committed to this process.



The day my cohort met was clear, warm, and beautiful. The co-director's home was situated on a beautiful piece of private property not far from the campus. This was a cycling and walking community with plenty of opportunity for exercise and fresh air. There would be eight of us: one white male, four white females, two African American females, and one Asian female. One white female was close to my age and was from Long Island, New York; she was very clear to state that she lived in the Hamptons and had a private practice in Manhattan. The other African American was much younger than me and was a vegan. I participated in the icebreakers and engaged in small talk with everyone, but in my mind I was creating my own space and considering with whom to align. We were encouraged to create bonds, study together, and become a cohesive group. I did not really see that coming off quite that way. We eventually called ourselves the UDUM (Undifferentiated United Mass). This worked for about two weeks, and pairings began to form. The one male member of our cohort lived off campus in a private residence he rented for the summer. Many times he was absent from our groups but was a wonderful individual.

My best connection was with an Asian woman. She and I would meet for late-night coffee, have discussions about lectures, and attend evening seminars together. She was extremely bright and was immersed in clinical information. She helped me to understand Freud and the other classical theorists, and she was great company. She had a long-term female partner. They were both from Canada and had very active private practices.

My room, the awesome library, and the magnificent botanical gardens became my safe spaces, my study spaces, and my nurturing places. There were frequent phone calls to my mother and friends. I missed my cats tremendously, and my plants at home concerned me. But I pressed into this process and moved through it with as much grace as I could muster, not caring much about my appearance; I was entrenched in my studies and the real reason I was there, which was to obtain a PhD and teach at the university.

During this process, my parents encountered illness and my friendship with someone special in my life dissipated and died. My parents would die before I completed my dissertation, and my life would not be the same.

### **What Is Your Message to Your Sisters Following You?**

#### **Dana**

No one can predict the best time for you to retire or seek a less-demanding work life. This is something that comes from inside of you. When you reach a certain age, you know yourself, and you are less inclined to allow others to tell you what you should think or feel. I believe this applies not only to your values and convictions but also to your plans for yourself in life. Our lives are not over. We may have many fruitful and productive years ahead of us or we may not, but for the time that we are here, it is important for us to continue to dream, to aspire, to achieve, and to do what is enriching and fulfilling for ourselves. If achieving a doctorate is something that you are thinking about, dreaming about, yearning to do, then by all means do it! *You* have something valuable to offer to the world, and this may be the means to get you there. You

determine what you can and cannot do; if you are mentally and spiritually ready, then you can handle any challenges that get in the way.

I have a colleague and mentor who said that my doctorate would give me wings. This credential will allow you to fly and to achieve whatever you see ahead of you. African American women receive 5.6% of all doctorate degrees (Dortch, 2015). Why not make that percentage higher? We have much to contribute.

### **Linda**

Obtaining an education is something you will never regret. Follow your heart, listen to your spirit, and move with their leading. Fear of the unknown is the only thing which will hold you back. Fear is dangerous—it will steal your future, diminish your present, and leave you wondering, “What if?” Age is truly what you make it. Scripture tells us we can bear fruit even in our old age (Psalm 91:14, New International Version). The more fruit you bear, the more you have to share with others. Achieving a doctorate is not the end to your learning process; it can be the beginning of helping others to press forward into their destinies. I do not regret any sacrifice I had to make to arrive at this point in my career. More importantly, I know that even though my parents did not make it to witness this moment, they were always encouraging me to do my best and to help others to achieve their best.

### **How Will Our New Voices Influence Change?**

### **Dana**

I have used my new voice as I had hoped—to contribute to the education of the social workers of tomorrow. I try to influence my students to be aware and make it a practice to stay aware of social policy legislation and regulation and proposed national, state, and local policy, and to consider them in relation to social justice goals. As private citizens, as direct service professionals, and as advocates, they have an important opportunity and responsibility to work toward positive change and the end of oppressive and discriminatory practices.

In addition to teaching, I am able to use my scholarship platform to produce articles and chapters that would not have been considered for publication without my doctorate. I am an editor of a new scholarly journal which is shining a light on urban issues and urban social work; giving voice to contemporary challenges and methods of addressing them; calling for advances in social work education, research, and community partnerships; and calling for the enhancement of social work practice toward improving the quality of life for urban populations. I have also been able to co-lead an urban women’s leadership development program for African American women Master of Social Work students. We have been able to provide these young women with opportunities and exposure that will be beneficial on both a professional and a personal level, including opportunities to participate in workshop presentations, volunteer at conferences, engage in community self-help efforts, and apply for fellowships as a result of their experiences. I would not have been eligible to be a leader in this effort in the academy without my doctorate.

I hope to encourage more women to pursue their goals of educational attainment and not be thwarted by the mere fact of their age, whatever it may be. In many cultures, including African American culture, our elders are respected as sages with knowledge and experience to impart. Let us step up and embrace this path for ourselves.

## **Linda**

This academic platform has provided the opportunity to assist up-and-coming social work students and professionals to be the best they can be. I never miss a moment to share practice experience and to encourage students to stretch beyond what they think they can do. I have become productive in my scholarship, publishing at least 10 articles in the last academic year. I am now awaiting a tenure and promotion decision and looking forward to working with a colleague at another university on a project addressing grief, homicide, and spirituality.

I am a co-editor on a special edition journal addressing race and reconciliation published by the National Association of Christians in Social Work. I have the opportunity to combine my spirituality and clinical practice together in the work I do in the class and in academia. I have the privilege of advising Master of Social Work students on their academic pursuits and in life decisions. The professional platform which this degree has afforded me continues to invigorate and excite me. I hope to continue this work for a long time and, more importantly, to help other women of a certain age to realize their dreams.

## **Discussion and Recommendations**

Hutchinson (2013) cites Erikson in stating the psychosocial struggle of middle adulthood is generativity versus stagnation. According to Hutchinson (2013), generativity is the ability to transcend personal interests to provide care and concern for younger and older generations. Hutchinson (2013) further cites Erikson in stating generativity encompasses “procreation, productivity, and creativity, and thus the generation of new beings, as well as of new products and new ideas, including a kind of self-generation concerned with further identity development” (p. 123).

According to Hutchinson (2013), Erikson saw generativity as an instinct that works to perpetuate society. The experience we embarked upon as two mid-life women highlights productivity, creativity, and procreation along with a desire to perpetuate society. We were also furthering self-identity development as we moved further into new careers and life experiences.

Reflecting on our two narratives, it is evident that there are a few perspectives and topics in common: We both were realizing long-held aspirations by pursuing our doctorates; we both believed that we had an enhanced ability to help students connect theory and practice; our support systems seemed to have been significant in achieving mutual goals; and we both encouraged others in this age group to pursue their dreams. The achievement of a doctorate at whatever age enables women to continue to work toward the advancement of human rights and address the disparities that urban and communities of color face (Bent-Goodley, 2016). This activity, therefore, seems to support the pursuit of a doctorate in the autumn years, not only as a

personal goal but as a social justice goal.

Our narrative reveals implications for future research. The topic is ripe for a qualitative study of women of color who achieved their doctorates after the age of 50. What were their experiences? What were their challenges? Did they have the support and encouragement that they needed? Would they recommend this path to others? Could their stories of motivation, challenge, resilience, and success be inspirational to future generations of women of color? The fact that we are both women of color is being addressed intentionally, and future research may reveal that our social identities of race and gender are not to be considered alone (Bowleg, 2012), but the intersection of these and other identities should be analyzed in order to understand both disparities in higher education and also how women who are similarly situated may provide support and encouragement for success among each other. Littlefield (2003) emphasizes that we can be adaptive in relation to our environments, and particularly that African American women can replace images that were derived from others imposing stereotypical descriptions and replace them with authentic images of women to transcend an oppression that is psychologically based and define ourselves for ourselves (Littlefield, 2003).

We recommend that a qualitative study follow to provide broader insights as to how mature women may provide support and encouragement to each other as they pursue their unfulfilled goals in a number of different areas. It is our hope that this strengths-based focus will help other mature women look beyond the barriers, focus on the very real possibilities that are before them, and understand that while their journey may not be easy, they can trust in themselves and their support systems and acknowledge their own worthiness and entitlement to pursue their dreams.

In her signature poem, “Still, I Rise,” Maya Angelou (1978) advances a positive message:

Just like moons and like suns,  
With the certainty of tides,  
Just like hopes springing high,  
Still I'll rise.

Autumn Divas may be regarded as living legacies with a wealth of valuable information, but more importantly we can be models for women seeking to re-invent themselves, and we can provide dynamic examples of future possibilities. As Autumn Divas we can seek to connect with others, building bridges for the benefit of the women of color in this age group who have much to give future generations and much to allow themselves to receive.

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