

3rd Place

Tori Nadel

Faith in All Senses of the Word

Dear Deborah,

I know that having to go through these past couple of decades was hard on you: discovering that doctors all over the world were using your mother's cells and making a profit off of them, having to deal with doctors asking you for blood samples, and being constantly bombarded by reporters trying to get information out of you. Throughout this whole ordeal, there were two opposing types of faith that were prevalent: your religious faith and your lack of faith in the medical profession.

It must have been difficult to not understand what was happening. When Susan Hsu called your father asking for blood samples, your family cooperated because you thought you would get answers out of doctors as to whether or not you had the same cancer your mother had. At the time, it was difficult to see that you were being taken advantage of by the medical field. You and your family were unaware what Hsu and Dr. McKusick were doing with the vials. Yet you went back to Dr. McKusick, even asking him if all of the blood tests he was doing meant that you were going to die young like your mother. But Dr. McKusick avoided the topic and talked about your mother's cells instead. When you finally found out about what the doctors were doing, you lost your faith in the medical profession.

You couldn't understand how it was possible that "if our mother's cells done so much for medicine, how come her family can't afford to see no doctors? Don't make no sense" (9). That is the greatest irony of this whole situation and the most colossal argument to appear in this book. On one hand, many people believe it is a disgrace that your mother has made such a contribution to science and modern medicine, and yet her family is unable to afford basic health care. These people believe that you and your family are owed compensation for the pain and suffering this situation has caused. In addition, these people believe that because mother's cells have created a multimillion dollar industry, you are entitled to some medical benefits. Without basic health care, you and your family would not be able to use any of the medicines your mother augmented immensely. On the other hand, there are people who believe that when your mother's cells were removed from her body, they became public property, meaning they did not belong to her anymore. Since they were not her property anymore, your family should not receive any compensation. I find it so inspirational that you did not want any compensation for the use of your mother's cells and all you wanted was recognition for your mother. That shows how much you love and care about your mother and want her to be known as a person, and not just as the woman behind HeLa. I think your cousin Gary said it best when he told you that "the word of God said if we honor our father and mother, we can live long upon this earth, and you doing that, you honoring your mother" (290).

Even with all of these hardships, you kept your faith as a way to motivate you to weather the storm. It is obvious that you are a Christian woman who takes great pride in your religion. Multiple times your mother's Bible is mentioned and how protective of it you are. Even when it was suggested that you

donate the Bible, you hid it, saying “That’s the only thing I have from my mother, now they want to take it!” (222). It is clear that your faith and your mother’s memory are connected and are equally important to you; your mother’s bible is the only object that seems as if it is solely yours, seeing as the rest of the world has access to your mother’s cells. You know that your mother is in heaven and she is helping you through your religion during the hard times following the discovery of the HeLa cells; this knowing connects you even more so to your religion.

The stress you were feeling due to the cells was apparent when you and Rebecca visited your cousin Gary and he cleansed your soul. You finally let it all out and asked for help: “Show me which way to go Lord...show me where you want me to go with these cells, Lord, please. I’ll do anything you want me to do, Lord, just help me with this BURDEN. I can’t do it alone-I thought I could. But I can’t TAKE it, Lord” (292). Up until now, you never expressed the internal pain and conflict you were feeling having to go through this experience. But with one visit to a family member, he was able to open your eyes and soul, freeing you of the weight that the cells were putting on your shoulders. You being able to open up to God and say how much stress and pressure you were feeling due to these cells when you could not tell anyone else how you were feeling depicts how engrained your religion is in your life.

Throughout this experience, you and your family have encountered many ups and downs; many adversities plagued you while triumphs blessed you. But during the whole ordeal, you never gave up and continued to fight for what you believed your mother deserved. Your dedication is admirable and I know your mother is proud of everything you did for her. Thank you for showing the world who Henrietta Lacks was as a person and not Helen Lane as everyone believed.

Sincerely,

Tori Nadel