



## Coretta King's health and death a lesson for life

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A product of humble southern roots, Coretta Scott King—as wife and widow of civil rights leader, Dr. Martin L. King, Jr.—has been called the queen mother of black America; black royalty; black America's "Jackie O." Coretta King was publicly always a woman of grace, courage and strength. At times in the past 50 years she may have seemed superhuman, never showing her fear while ever-maintaining her poise on the front line of the civil rights struggle; in the presence of regular death threats to her family; her husband's rumored philandering; the shock of his death, raising their four children alone and traveling the country carrying the torch of her late husband's dream of equal rights for all people. In her life, King taught us to stand fearless, erect, strong and steady in the fight to survive. She taught us to keep the faith, to keep pressing on; to never give up your dream. In her death, she yet teaches a valuable lesson—a health lesson—to all women, especially black

American women of faith.

As I learned that Mrs. King had died in Mexico four days after arriving at an alternative medicine facility, my first reaction was, *what is she doing all the way over there? Isn't she severely debilitated and frail after her massive stroke? What type of strain did that trip put on her elderly and weakened heart and body?* I then read she had advanced Stage 3 ovarian cancer and had been given no hope of survival by doctors in the U.S. With that, some of the answers became painfully clear. King traveled thousands of miles in search of a miracle because timing is everything, and desperate times call for desperate measures.

Like so many women in America, Coretta—Black America's Queen Mother—was a woman of proven inner strength and overcoming faith. She believed in the power of God. In miracles. In dreams. And Coretta had a dream, a new one. She, and/or her family, dreamt that, despite a partially paralyzed, pain-ridden,

debilitated body and a diagnosis of doom, medical miracles could happen; and that maybe—just maybe—it wasn't too late. But alas, it was, and King died far away from home, in a foreign land, before her anticipated miracle therapy began.

So new questions arose in my mind: What if King hadn't had the stroke? Might she have weathered the journey better? What if her ovarian cancer had been diagnosed at an earlier stage? Had she had regular, annual Gyn exams? Pap smears? Blood work? Scans? Had anyone fully researched the facility in Mexico, now closed and cited for unsanitary conditions and unauthorized, unlicensed medical procedures?

Or had she, like many women, been so busy with work and the service of others, failed for years to acknowledge any signs and symptoms as disease began to consume her body? And if she'd noticed symptoms, did she simply pray about them, to the exclusion of seeking timely medical care and

counsel? Who helped keep the keeper of the dream?

As I and others grieve King's death, part of me also grieves that she died so far away from home, while grasping for a fleeting wisp of hope. But even in her untimely death, Coretta King is speaking to all of us right now, teaching us lessons for survival. With the last phases of her life, in her own way, she showed us the importance of integrating undying faith with medical compliance and timely medical testing.

Many Black women will go to church all day every Sunday, but won't take one day a year to get a PAP smear and mammogram. Yet that yearly checkup could help save lives. Often the first people to pray when a serious illness strikes, Black women may be the last to seek timely medical care. As a result they are suffering with, and dying from, diseases

others are increasingly surviving. It doesn't have to be that way. Don't wait until a medical emergency happens before turning to your faith *and* your physician. [See book, BLESSED HEALTH.]

In April 2005 Coretta Scott King was reportedly advised to take medication to manage an irregular heartbeat. At that time she, reportedly, refused and four months later suffered a minor heart attack and a massive stroke, leaving her paralyzed and mostly unable to speak. Five months later, Mrs. King is dead.

What if King had been compliant, and taken the medication when prescribed? Perhaps the stroke would've been avoided. And despite its suspect credentials, what if King had arrived months earlier to the facility in Mexico and, like others have reported, experienced

a cure, or minimally, a slowing in the progression of her ovarian cancer? What if, what if?

We may never know the answers to the *what if's*. However, we do know that in the past year, we've lost important civil rights icons—Rosa Parks, Shirley Chisholm, Vivian Malone Jones, C. Delores Tucker and others. And now, first lady Coretta Scott King.

As the torch passes to the younger generation, we need to be able to walk upright and strong for the struggle ahead. It is time to change the history of black women's health and social value in this country. Doing so can change that of our race and all future generations.

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