You will recall I told you
I received my teaching vocation
While at St. Patrick’s High School in 1980
But what is also very important to note
Is that I received the wisdom to teach
From my late father

It was a special gift
He passed on to me
That I shared with all
My students and those
That came in contact with me
Over the decades past
And this was how it all went down:

One day while I was on vacation
In the beautiful City of Zwedru
At the eastern tip of Liberia
My wise father called me
To sit with him and chat
On his bamboo bench  
In his back yard  
As father and son should always do

We sat under his orange trees  
That bore sweet fruits  
And provided shades in the dry season heat

A photo of one of the unpaved streets in Zwedru, Grand Gedeh County, Liberia. Home sweet home!  
Remember the song: “When will I see my home; when will I see my native land; I shall never forget my home.” (Picture culled from the internet)

He asked me to explain to him  
My experience in college  
For I was then a senior student  
At the University of Liberia  
The biggest school in Liberia  
For going to LU those days  
Is not like these days!

So the Old Man was proud  
To see me progress academically  
Because he was not even a sixth grader  
But he valued good education  
Unlike many of us today  
Who don’t give a jik about learning!

Thus it was while relaxing  
On his bamboo bench  
In his backyard under the orange trees  
That my father said to me:  
“Come sit by me”
And of course I obeyed his order
Because in those days
A son’s only alternative was to obey
The instructions of his father and mother
So that his days may be prolonged on earth
Thus I sat very close to my father
And then the conversation began:

Rabbi Gbaba shares words of wisdom with readers
Sometimes we should reminisce on the old days to get inspiration to move forward. Put a little bit of fun in your life and do not overlook the advice the old folks give you. It will carry you a long way in life. Do you remember the Liberian rhyme: “I was passing by and my aunty called me in and she said to me, you got far way to go. Oh rock it shake it—choo-choo!”

“So you in college?” he asked
“Yes, pa” I responded
Then he asked:
“So you going to LU henn”?
I said “Yes, sir”
Then he asked again
“Where ting you doing
Apart from learning book?”
I proudly told him
I was an English teacher
At St. Patrick’s High School!
And he seemed awestruck as he said:
“What!”
And the goats that were grazing
On the fresh grass near by shouted
“Baaaa”!

“Look friends, you can be what you want to be if you put your mind to it! Don’t listen to the noise in the market or you won’t be able to purchase your market. I went to the market of life and I brought home wisdom and knowledge and now I can share with those who value truth, wisdom and justice. What about you? What are you purchasing from the marketplace of life?” Rabbi Gbaba (2012)

You mean you teaching in that
Fine Catholic school
On Capitol Hill!”
The Papay asked
“Yes, pa” I replied

“Well,” my father paused
In order to grasp a breath of fresh air
And to gather his thoughts
And then he continued his lecture

“You see those children
You teaching in dat school
Treat them like your own children
Because you can never tell
Who will be President of Liberia
You hear me?”
He always ended his advices
With “You hear me?”
And then he waited
For you to say:
“Yes, sir”!

“Big eye bumpy” Joe!” Oh, where you say! I dare you call me that name again. I dare you like dead rotten dog! Because if you call me that name again we will fueh! (smile) Note that my hair cut is not what you modern day fellows term as fashion or fad. Instead, due to my status as a traditional Jewish Krahn prince, I have only shaved my hair twice to commemorate the death of my parents. Hence, the photo in this poem was taken when I lost my mother on May 14, 2011. In our traditional culture there is always a significance and meaning for what we do. For instance, shaving one’s head when your parents pass away is a sign of respect to the dead. It is a traditional custom that dates back to the beginning of time and it is done to preserve the rich cultural traditions handed down to us by our forebears. Hope this teaches a moral and cultural lesson to all you young folks out there who are fond of cutting bald hair cuts just for big bluff.

Back in the day
I was very young and handsome
And the girls used to eye me
Like flies eying poo-poo on South Beach!
I cut my hair Tubman style
So that I looked like my Grebo Papay
And all my Grebo people
They lovingly called me “Baby Vat”

Mind you!
I did not cut sarboo like the picture above
But my eyes bulged out of their sockets
Like the eyes of a bull frog
And all my friends and playmates
Called me “Big Eye Bumpy”!
A-hay, trouble coming!
“Big eye bumpy”!
No! You did not want
To call me by that name those days!
Because I either cried like a baby
Or we threw “kpeetee” on the beach!

And as a PHP “gbannan”
I knew how to fight in the sand
Ask my cousin Freddie Gbye
He will tell you
What I used to do to him
Because I used to soak
That “gboogor” like one sponge!

I used to put sand in his eyes
And then give him “karlopay” in the sand
And Ma Ida used to cry for her Junior Boy!
“Gardeyh I beg you leave your small brother”!

But mind you!
Some people called me
“Big Eye Bumpy”
Because they admired me
And also because others envied me
Especially the way how I pulled the crowd
And attracted the pretty girls
That kept telling me
“Gardeyh, your eyes look “sexy”!

My name oh, my people!
My ma will beat me!
Rabbi Gbaba in his poetic posture

“I always pray for my students and fellow countrymen and women because they are the source of my joy. I pray that they realize self-fulfillment and self-actualization which comes to those who burn the midnight oil while others slumber. You and I can achieve if we put our minds to it. And, I do not mean by rhetoric but rather one must match words with actions or there will never be self-fulfillment or self-actualization because they both come through actions and not through mere politics or “chay-chay polay”.

Well I know you will say and think
I’m making my own, own morale thick
Like palm cabbage in palm butter
But my dears if you don’t say “I am”
Who in the world will say “Thou art”?
Dat Liberian man you waiting for
To praise his friend man!
“Pooah! You waste your time!”
Frederick Cole says

Well to continue my story
I was very clever
Like hell in school
When I was coming up
And monkey self tell lie!
Because I had photographic brain!
And when they say “frisky”
That would be me—Gardeyh!
You can ask my big brother Koon-muen
And he will tell you who I sor
You know Kru man now
Kru man likes big Kwi names
Everybody in PHP called him “Koon-muen”
But one day the “brada” came from visiting
His girlfriend Manslon in West Point
And he said his name was Westmoreland Nagbe
“Sayh! Erh-wlatee oh”!

But fear me pekin!
I made hundreds in class like water!
And all the girls used to spy on my paper
And they used to come see “papa”
After school for special lessons
Especially when the Old Ma was not home
And as one of my biology teachers at LU
Used to say:
“You know the balance”!

Also sometimes my classmates
Believed I had “zay-kay” for book
But what side!
It was the monkey and chicken brains
That added to my human brain
To make me a “Teddy Kpan”!
So thanks to my mother Princess Garh
For she did it all for me
By cooking delicious meals
So that I might be filled to study hard
Rabbi Gbaba in a contemplative mood

“Some day I want all of you to remember me as the scholar/artist who trusts that the precious blood of Christ will heal our wounds and bring us back together once again as Liberians caught in the vicissitudes of worldly life. I want you to realize that Christ is the Alpha and Omega: i.e., wherever you go around the world you will meet him there and he will still be the same: yesterday, today and tomorrow. For, you and I will pass away but the word of God will remain eternal and all the worldly riches we gather as we deprive our people of safe drinking water and electricity, all that will vanish in the deep blue sea and those who now deprive others of drinking water and electricity shall thirst forever at the gates of hell; but those who show mercy and love to their brethren will be like a vine planted near the rivers of water: they shall bear fruit in due season and their offspring shall not hunger or thirst or beg for bread. Amen.” Rabbi Gbaba (2012).

I remember Ma Garh
Used to kill chickens
For me to eat
When I got promoted
From one grade to the next
And she would give me
The chicken or monkey head
Because she strongly believed
The brain of the chicken or monkey
Would enrich my thinking capacity
And for sure it did!
She did the same when she cooked palm butter
With plenty pepper and palm cabbage
And she laid the monkey or chicken head
Right on top of my steaming hot
And delicious palm butter rice
And I “slooped” the monkey
Or chicken brain
Like it was going out of style!

Princess Martha Gbeh-Nyennonh-Garh Gaye
Great descendant of King Boduo-Chelley of the Nien Dynasty
of the Krahn ethnic group of Liberia (1930-2011)

My people where that Krahn Old Moms
Got that wisdom from
To give me monkey
Or chicken head to eat
Only God one knows
But she always made sure
To put that chicken
Or monkey head in my bowl
Then she would instruct me
To eat the brain of the monkey or chicken
That is called “zammie”
In the Krahn language
So that I might be knowledgeable

And so if the Krahn people say:
“Orh blay zammie”
It means:
“He or she has brains”
Or “He or she is smart”

Well, that was how I got my smartness—
From eating the chicken or monkey head
That my mother decked in my big bowl
Of palm butter and rice
With chicken or monkey meat
Floating on the top
Of my palm butter and rice
That looked like Mount Kilimanjaro from afar!

But I beg you
I take God to hold your foot
I ain’t say tell the “Shay-vay” dem
We eat monkey back home
Because here they call it “Animal Abuse”!

Well, lest I forget
This little piece is really
Not about my mother
As it is about the Papay
Named Prince Jack Tomoonh Yeleyon Gbaba

My father was descendant of Yarlee-Gbenh
Founder of Zwedru
He was also great, great descendant
Of King Boduo of the Nien Dynasty
King Boduo was the father
Of my mother’s ancestor
Named Boduo-Chelley

Hence the Papay and the Old Ma
They were from the same royal line
And in case you do not know
What it means for husband and wife
To come from the same royal family tree
The old folks call it:
“Keeping it in the family!”
And that other “chay-chay-polay” part
I ain’t got red shoes
To go to Judge Jallah’s court!

Well, to continue my story
My father was so wise
That God would not have forgiven me
If I had not inherited Pa’s wisdom
And so that is the reason why
Today I am as wise as a serpent
For I learned from the best
I learned from my pa’s counsels

I obeyed my parents’ counsels
And applied them in whatever I did
In order to reach this far
Hence I was brought up
In a way that I should grow
So when I am old
I will not depart from it!

Anyway after I got my
First teaching job
At St. Patrick’s High School
I was very green
Like a green paw-paw tree!

Also I did not realize
That my students would be
My very best friends in life today
Even though in the classroom it was different
Because I drilled my students inside out
To make sure they learned well

In those days unlike these so-called modern days
Teachers meted out corporeal punishments
To their students without fear or favor
We used to beat the living hell out of our students
To put some senses in their thick skulls
Especially for those who felt
They were above the law
My St. Patrick’s students knew for discipline
Because when I said: “Joseph, the belt”!
They all knew what was coming up!
We did this to help the rude ones realize
That the law was above them
And that they were below the law!
“God damn it! Gor-vloh-bumboy” you!

And the parents never said “Fuen”
When we “quay-ayed” their children
Because that was the order of the day
To beat the living devil out of our students
And replace Satan with Christ or Allah
And with the fear of God
And love for one’s country and compatriots!

Hence those days
We disciplined our kids
So that they would not go
Off tangent in society
Therefore it is not
Like here in the West
Where the big excuse
For student rudeness
Is sadly classified as ADHD

But back home we beat
The living ADHD
Out of our kids with rattan
We whipped them with belts
And we put “bah” (Kru for pepper)
In those suckers’ eye balls!
To straighten their behinds!

Sometimes we “whisahed” them
With a solid slap
Especially if they had “kawah” mouths
That would not keep shut
When we were teaching them in class!
What big!

So thank goodness today
All we see around us
Are beautiful Liberian children
Children who achieve well in life
That are grateful
For the role we played in their lives
Like “Baby E”
Like “Boy Horace”
Like Mani Woods
Or like Tina Boston
And “Baby Sam”
Like my daughter Jolynn
And my other dynamic daughter
Her name is Cellue Doe!

As an elder I cherish and promote the young so that when I am dead and gone they can take my place. We call that love and selflessness. Above Princess Ariminta and I share a photo with our nephew, computer genius Manjah Sam A. Massaquoi, Jr. He hails from the royal household of the Massaquoi family from Grand Cape Mount County in western Liberia. His ancestor was a great traditional Liberian Vai king from the west and his grandfather was the great Grebo Chief Tibli Dickson from Maryland County, Liberia. Pekin eat the computer like nobody’s business!

And so my brothers and sisters
That was how I learned to be a father
A brother
And an uncle to all my students
And, has my father’s counsels
Paid off over the years
Yes, indeed!
For a child can never go wrong
When he heeds the counsels
Of his beloved father and mother
And sharing the wisdom of my father
With other people’s children
Has brought me a long way in life!

“Ah-zeo, Pa!”
Younsua po-omh-boryea-bo oh”!
Rabbi Prince Joseph Tomoonh-Garlodeyh Gbaba, Sr., Ed. D.
The “Balla”! Who wants to ball with me! Your scared! My game is tight, pekin! Peace! I am out for now!
July 10, 2012