

MY SISTER EMILY AIG-IMOUKHUEDE

A HOMAGE FROM FORTUNA BUCKNOR

How does one give honor to a person larger than life?

How does life pay tribute to a person larger than itself?

Who can discern such wisdom?

Wisdom, Arete, Sophia!

Where are all three Traits?

Help me pay tribute to my Sister Emily whose aspirations were to exude all three.

The Godly wisdom that is innocent, gentle, reasonable, peace-loving, impartial, and sincere.

Arete – the performance of excellence in all proper function and calling.

Sophia – the representation of divine wisdom and female spirit in a chaotic world seeking to plummet nature as was created by the unknown and unseen.

Click, ...click, ...click... candid camera snapshot of my Sister Emily.

Fortuna's selfie-reflection of her.

“You are going to marry my brother Frank? I asked, as I held her hands and looked into to her dark brown eyes and ebony face. She was the prettiest person on earth. Not waiting for an answer, “You will, won’t you,” I went on, sounding more like a decree than request, as I continued to squeeze her hands tightly.

Though I have eavesdropped on many of the adult conversations during her frequent visits to my mother, this was a different occasion. There were many sounds of laughter and “thank you God!” than usual. And one too many bursts of evocative “thank you Emily, my daughter, you won’t regret this decision...,” coming from my mother. Sister Emily had come to tell my mother about the new turn her relationship with Bro. Frank had taken. I bet she must have blushed, perhaps, a bit discomfited at the feisty question from a twiggy looking child. A gentle “Yes,” was her answer to me. Our eyes met and I could tell she was making a silent promise to me. I knew then that she was going to be my soul sister. I had gained a lifetime friend and confidante. It seared in my mind.

Unfortunately, my mother did not live to see the wedding. Nonetheless, on many occasions, as the years went by, Sister Emily would often reiterate that my mother was the *advocateur* of her marriage to Brother Frank. The blessed fruits of this marriage are Ereptan, Aigboje, Kemi, and Aigus, and of course, the many lovely grandchildren.

When I think of the word Family, I think of Sister Emily. Her family influence on me ran deeply. It was never obvious that marriage to my Brother Frank was the nexus. She loved me profoundly. She was never short of affirming me. In her, I had a true sister and a woman of substance to look up to. She introduced me to the art world. My appreciation of art in general, and the knowledge of Nok culture and traditional art were fostered when she held the position of Curator of the Nigerian National Museum at Onikan, Lagos Island. A visit to her office was a thrill. There was always a grub on her desk and though busy, she always found time to take me around the museum, carefully explaining the paintings, artefacts, or ethnographic exhibits. She informed me of any new acquisition or introduced me to the artist whose work was being exhibited.

On one occasion, she took me on a visit to the home of one of the Nigerian-based Leventis brothers. The Leventis are a renowned Greek-Cypriot business dynasty -- founders and owners of the International Leventis Trading Company – the second-largest Coca-Cola bottler in the world after the United States bottler, Coca-Cola Enterprises. They were also at that time, important benefactors of the Nigerian National Museum. As we sat in this luxurious lounge, and over cocktail and Greek olives and assorted cheeses and biscuits, Sister Emily displayed the art works we had brought along. She expertly described each piece of work – the period, style, and artistry, including suggestions of the appropriate frames essential to showcase each piece of art.

I recall that the word “gilded” kept coming up during the conversation. Not to be left out, at some point during the ongoing discussion, I chose to use the word “gold-plated.” ...Ouch! I just demonstrated my limited sophistication and vocabulary. The topic was on ‘the gilded age,’ I immediately realized my inappropriate choice of word. I was mortified. Thinking I had shamed my Sister Emily and that she would be embarrassed, instead she quickly and deftly turned it around. She said, “Oh, yes, Fortuna is trying to remind me about the thin coating of gold. ... Methods of gilding that includes hand application and electroplating, that I must instruct the art framers to use.” I thought that was so smart. I held off laughing as she winked at me. When we later got into the car on our way home, I was expecting her to make some awful remark, on the contrary, she praised me for holding my own among grownups, well cultured and classy audience. She told me she was immensely proud of me especially when she observed that our hosts were impressed when I commended the decors in their house, especially my remarks about the Persian and Turkish rugs sprawled around their house. “You seem knowledgeable about rugs,” she stated. I felt elated. My seemingly expertise came from several of the home décor books with themes on Turkish and Persian rugs and decors that I often borrowed from her.

Sister Emily's love for me was also extended to my son. Seyi always will lovingly describe her as "exuding genuine tenderness." Our holiday vacations to Nigeria constantly included spending some weeks and frequent sleepovers in Sister and Brother's house in Ikoyi. On those lavishly lucky occasions, Seyi experienced her loving kindness and care. She spoiled him completely. Seyi was sumptuously served freshly squeezed orange or mango or pineapple juice at every breakfast. As I write, one kitchen appliance that will always be found in Seyi's apartment kitchen is the latest model of cold pressed juicer anyone can think of. His cultivated morning glass of fruit juice can be traced back to Sister Emily's personally squeezed fruit juices -- at her insistence -- served him at every breakfast as a child.

When I think of ancient iconic Greco-Roman historians – Herodotus and Thucydides or Tacitus and Plutarch and I swing my thoughts back to their contemporary exemplars, my Sister Emily comes to mind. She was a bank of knowledge about Nigeria's History and germane family matters. Unsurprising, for one who held a B.A. degree in history. She was my go-to-person about family narrations. A bond to my mother, and vitally, the one person that I heavily relied on to tell me significant things regarding my mother who died when I was just barely eight years old. In short, Sister Emily had been present since I was a little girl, during my most impressionable years, and of course, my adult life.

Her outreaching care and concern for others are boundless. As an advocate of women issues, she held the position of president of the National Council of Women Societies (1988-1993.) She followed the likes of prior presidents that included Kofo Ademola, Elizabeth Awoliyi, Kofoworola Pratt, Ronke Doherty, Ifeyinwa Nzeako, and Hilda Adefarasin before her.

Love and respect for my Sister Emily are also without borders. When it was made known to my Church, St. Bartholomew on Park Avenue, New York City, (St. Bart's for short) that she had passed, the outpouring of love and prayers for her have been deeply profound. Peter Thompson, the Associate Rector for Formation and Liturgy, emailed me, saying: "...I certainly will add Aunty Emily to the Prayer list...." Concluding with: "May Aunty Emily rest in peace and rise in glory and may you and your family know God's peace in this time of grief." Two days after, he writes me again: "I've received several requests from lectors on Sunday about how to pronounce "Aig-Imoukhuede" – can you give guidance?" Atypical of St. Bart's aim for perfection. I sent him a recorded voice-over elocution of *Aig-Imoukhuede*.

Further, Kathleen Breiten, the leader of St. Bart's Centering Prayer group with prayer sessions held on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays, in mentioning Sister Emily at each prayer gathering, refers to her as "Our dear Emily." And ...stating, "I feel her love for the world." Suffice to say that these are indicators of the love and high esteem Sister Emily engendered from many – even strangers. Her name has been mentioned in Sunday Services and among all groups in St. Bart's Church since her passing away. It is not a hyperbole to say that she loved boundlessly and peoples' love for her are without borders.

The last three weeks of her life will forever be an important episode in my life. The contents of a morning text from her prompted me to telephone rather than respond with another text. That phone conversation lasted for almost three hours during which she took me down a memory lane going way back as fifty years and beyond. I am deeply grateful for her life. To the Holy Spirit that prodded me to telephone rather than text her on that day, I am profoundly thankful. In my reveries since she passed, I am certain of the divine presence of God in the ensued topics, prayers, and revelations in those three hours. What emerged will forever be seared in the innermost recess of my heart -- where for now, my dearest Sister Emily, lovingly resides.