

Float Like A Butterfly, Sting Like A Bee: An Unlikely Hero

By Rev. Beverly Seese

Cassius Marcellus Clay Jr. was born on January 17, 1942 in Louisville, Kentucky halfway through the second World War. He was a descendant of slaves of the antebellum South, and was predominantly of African descent, with smaller amounts of Irish and English family heritage. He was named after his father, Cassius Marcellus Clay Sr. (1912–1990), who himself was named in honor of the 19th-century politician and one-time slave owner turned staunch abolitionist Cassius Marcellus Clay, also from the state of Kentucky.

At the age of only 18, Ali gained world-wide notoriety by winning a gold medal in the light heavyweight division at the 1960 Summer Olympics. He started boxing at age 12 and won the world heavyweight championship from Sonny Liston in a major upset at age 22 in 1964. He lost and won back this position two more times during his phenomenal career. He was raised Baptist, but converted to Islam and became a Muslim after 1961, eventually taking the name Muhammad Ali.

In 1966, Ali refused to be drafted into the military, citing his religious beliefs and opposition to the Vietnam War. He was arrested, found guilty of draft evasion, and stripped of his boxing titles. He appealed the decision to the Supreme Court, which overturned his conviction in 1971, but the long court battle meant he could not fight for nearly four years and this cost him a significant period of peak performance as an athlete. His actions as a conscientious objector to the Vietnam War made him an icon for the larger counterculture generation of the 60's, and he was a high-profile figure of racial pride for African Americans during the civil rights movement. As a Muslim, Ali was initially affiliated with Elijah Muhammad's Nation of Islam (NOI). He later disavowed the NOI, adhering to Sunni Islam, and supporting racial integration like his former mentor Malcolm X. Muhammad Ali died just 4 years ago at age 74 from complications of Parkinson's disease.

Growing up as a farm girl in the agriculturally-rich Central Valley of California, I was not even vaguely aware of Muhammad Ali until his Championship in 1964. And even then I would not have looked at him as a hero. But today when I think of this famous man, I contend that he had a huge impact on his generation and can definitely be classified as heroic. Born with few advantages and minimal prospects, he found a way to move forward in the racist world of the 1960s, garnering international respect and financial wealth. Ali made some very difficult choices at a tender age. He chose his religious path and lived out what he believed Islam taught about military involvement. He was willing to be dragged through the court system, sacrificing much of what he had worked so hard for, and his stand triumphed in the end.

One of the quotes attributed to him is so inspiring - - - "Service to others is the rent you pay for your room here on earth." Ali was known for being a humanitarian and philanthropist. He focused on practicing his Islamic duty of charity and good deeds, donating millions to charitable organizations and disadvantaged people of all religious backgrounds. He was a conscientious objector to war and he supported racial integration. He teamed up with Michael J. Fox to promote funding for research to overcome Parkinson's disease. He was dyslexic and had only a high school education, but in 2007 he received an honorary doctorate of humanities degree from Princeton University and one in 2009 from Muhlenberg College for his perseverance in and out of the ring. Ali embarked on goodwill missions to Afghanistan and North Korea and was recognized with a lifetime achievement award from Amnesty International.

Muhammad Ali was one of a kind. He had a mind of his own and wasn't afraid to live his life to the fullest. He spent the majority of his life giving away his earnings to help the causes he supported all around the world, and for this received dozens of awards and recognition from many quarters. On November 19, 2005, the \$60 million non-profit Muhammad Ali Center opened in downtown Louisville, Kentucky. In addition to displaying his boxing memorabilia, the center focuses on core themes of peace, social responsibility, respect, and personal growth.

Known for his rhymes Ali spoke like no man the world had seen before. So confident in what he said; fluent, smooth, creative, and intimidating. He was a boxer and an activist, but he also had a role in influencing hip-hop, the music style that then dominated pop-culture. According to *The Guardian*, "Some have argued that" Ali was "the first rapper." "Float like a butterfly, sting like a bee; the hands can't hit what the eyes can't see." This phrase was often repeated to describe his style in the ring, and became shorthand for the man who considered himself "The Greatest" before the rest of the world caught on.

Eventually nicknamed "The Greatest", he is widely regarded as one of the most significant and celebrated sports figures of the 20th century, and as one of the greatest boxers of all time. There is much that can be cited as reasons to deny Ali a place of honor in our nation's history. In spite of finally sustaining a 30-year 4th marriage, the harm that he inflicted on a number of women is tragic when judged by our times and our class standing. This cannot be overlooked, but hopefully can be forgiven. As universities awarded him with honorary degrees, I believe Ali could be awarded an honorary UUA membership for his life's accomplishments and his values-based activism. Heroes come in many different forms. Muhammad Ali grew into the role and is deserving of the title.