

WAYS OF LEARNING



Florence Agbah

Introduction

Florence Agbah was born in Ghana. She now belongs to a readers' and writers' group which meets weekly in Chapeltown Community Centre and is part of the Adult Basic Education provision set up by Leeds City Council. This is the second book of Florence's autobiographical series, 'My Way'.

"I always wanted to write a book but I couldn't read and write. So I joined the group at Chapeltown Community Centre. I'd like to thank all those who helped me work on the book. Without them my story would never have been told."

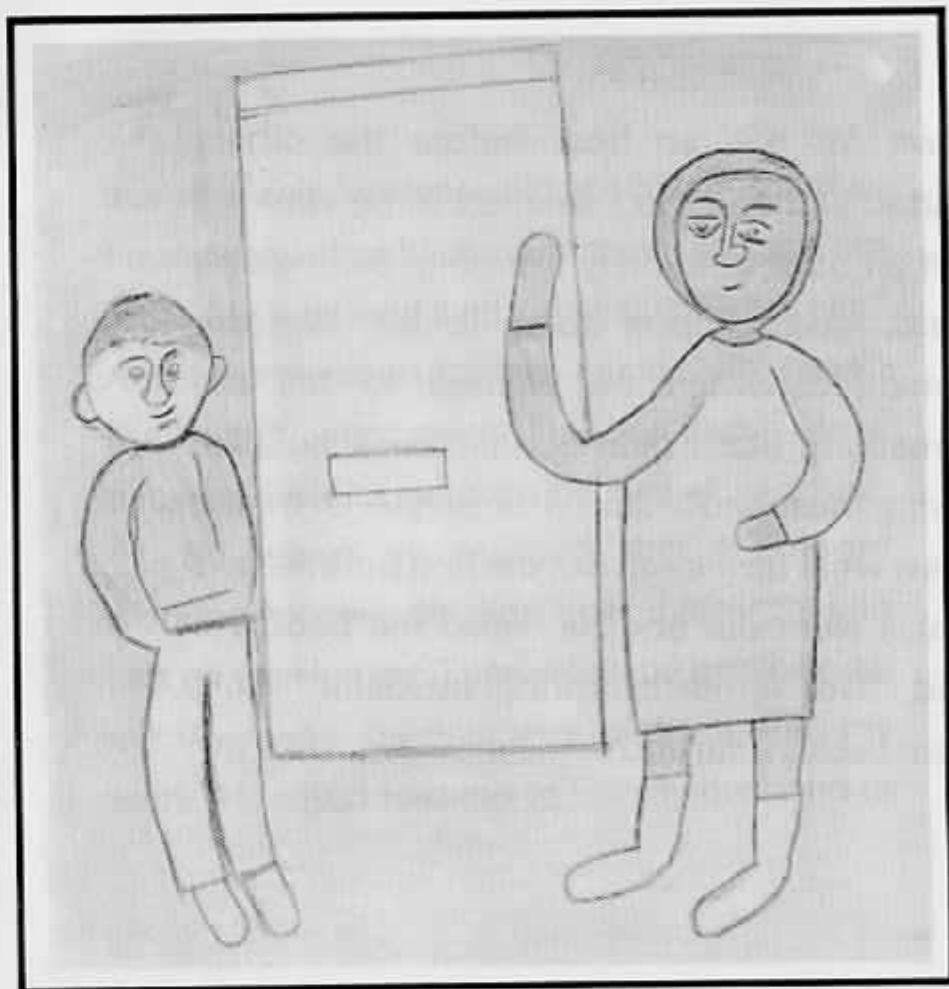
Text, drawings and cover design by Florence Agbah, 1986.

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I came to Britain in 1966. Six months later, I got a job at Y.M.C.A. My job was to clean certain places, including the men's toilets. I worked with three other people, two ladies, one of them was called Lou and the other one, the nice one, was Dorothy. The man was called Bill. I liked Bill also. A very nice old gent. Our boss was called Mr. Watson. He and his wife were the caretakers at the time, at the Y.M.C.A. I used to go there every morning about 6.30, when I was

supposed to start working at 7.00. And I used to bang the door.

Instead of knocking gently I just bang, bang, bang, because it takes ages before they come, and they go "Hello, Florence. Come in!" But there was one time, he just opened the door without talking to me. But I didn't mind because I didn't speak the language anyway. I managed to learn to say 'Hello', but nothing else. So when he opened the door I said "Hello" and ran inside. And inside I used to sit



down for half an hour before the others started working. So I seemed to be working half an hour free every morning. But I didn't mind. I was happy doing it. Mr. Watson, sometimes when he wanted to tell me something that I didn't understand, he said, "Bring husband". And I understood that. I knew what he meant. But the first time he said that, I went out and he called me back. He said, "No, tomorrow bring husband." So I went back inside and in the morning I took my

husband. Mr. Watson said not to come half an hour early. I should come at seven o'clock, not 6.30. My husband said, "All right. I'll tell her." And he translated for me. I said, "Oh, I see". But I still went there half an hour early, because I didn't want to be late.

So when he realised that I enjoyed working for free, he didn't mind after that. In fact he was happy. Then when he got to know me very well, he was very pleased with my work. He often told me to tell my husband to

come and I thought, "Oh, what have I done now?" Well, to my husband he said, "Your wife is a very good worker. She works slow, but she works very neat. I'm very pleased with her work." And my husband translated again. Then I went back to my work again, as usual.

Now about these two ladies. Louey, as they call her, she took charge of making our tea. We had a half-hour tea-break every day. Louey was about 65, I think, maybe 70, but she was very fit, and very light on her feet, and

she used to get our tea and sandwich. We used to get a sandwich free in the canteen. And tea as well, free. Our pay was about £3 or £3. 50. I'm not sure now. So, just half a day's work, 7 while 11.30, with half an hour break. So one day Louey made the tea as usual and my cup was a tiny cup. They had the mugs and I had a proper coffee cup, a tiny white cup from the kitchen. And one time, this particular morning, when she brought up all the cups to the office to drink tea, and she poured the tea

out, mine happened to be filthy, which means she didn't wash the cup the day before. But she's the one who took charge of those things. Nobody asked her to do it. She just took charge of making the tea. While we were working, she went off and made the tea. When we went back to work, she washed the cups and saucers and the pots. So we all took it for granted that that's her part of it, and when we'd finished we went off and got on with our work.

So this particular day she brought my cup to pour the tea and it was filthy, and she just looked at it and poured the tea in, and pushed it to my side. And then she started watching me. I didn't take any notice. As usual I didn't say anything. I just listened to them go on about their business. You know how people like talking. Talk, talk, talk, talk. So when it came to drinking the tea, I just left it there. I ate my sandwich and forgot about the tea. So in the end she said, "Florence, drink your tea."

So I said, "No." She said, "Drink your tea."
"No, dirty," I said.

Dirty. I know what dirty is because they'd been teaching me that, especially the caretaker. If he wanted me to clean some place then he took me there and he said to me, "Florence, here, dirty." And I cleaned it up. So I know the word 'dirty'.

So I told her "Dirty. No good."

They all laughed. So Bill said, "She's right. It is dirty." So I left it there. She cleared

everything off and washed up, and after that day, she never gave me a dirty cup to drink in.

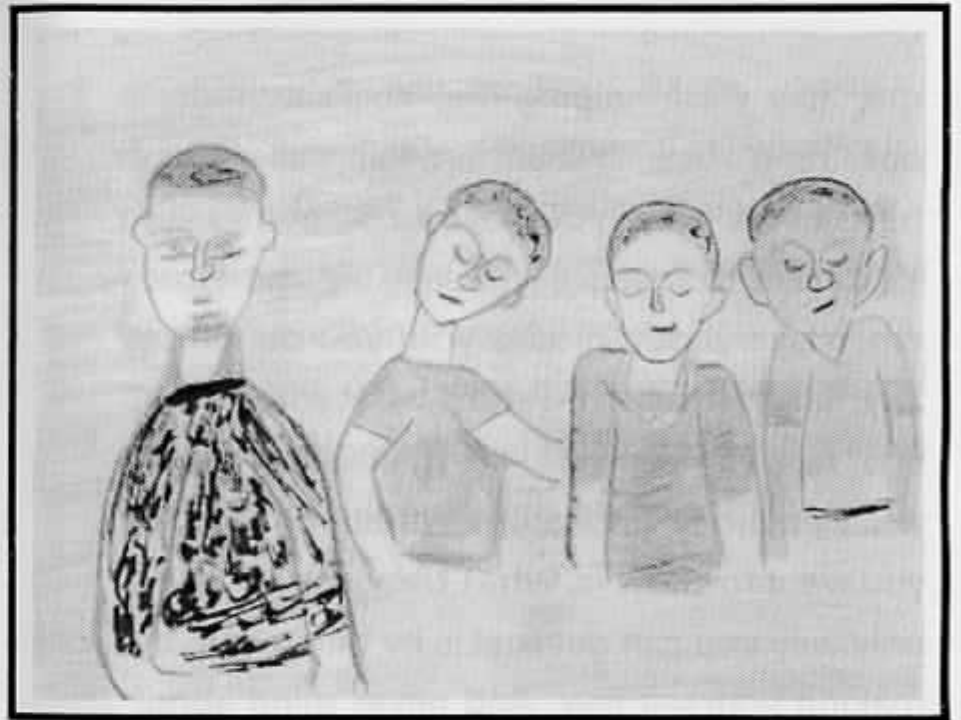
But they were nice people to work with. I used to listen to them talking all the time. For a whole half-hour break I was just sitting there listening to them talking. And every now and then it clicked, something they say that I heard before. Well, I have to try to find out what it is, because sometimes they talk to each other about something and pass it around, and then I know what it is. For



example, they say things like "Pass me me fag. Pass me me fag eh, willya?" Well, I say, "Fag? What is a fag?" "A fag's a cigarette." "I see." A cigarette. I know what cigarette is because my husband smokes so when they say 'fag' that is a new word. It sounds really terrific. So I just laugh, and they laugh with me. Because to me, the only way I will learn is if I smile a lot and laugh a lot. They think I'm stupid, but by doing so, I will learn from what they say. Because it makes them happy to

think they have a fool to play around with.
And it helps me to learn the language quicker.
And that's what I have done.

So I worked in Y.M.C.A. until the middle
of '68. After I left I got a job at Lewis's
cafeteria, clearing tables, taking dishes away,
and that helped me as well because there
were people talking all the time. They were
always talking, and most of them liked to
make fun of me because I didn't speak the
language. But it didn't bother me because, to



me, they were helping me. You see, there's one thing To learn anything at all, you have to be easy. You have to take life easy. You have to respect yourself. So, therefore, when everybody mocks you, you don't feel anything because you know what you are and you respect yourself, so it doesn't matter what anybody thinks or says about you. All you want to know is, **what they say!** And the only way you can get that is by being soft, by making yourself low. And never mind about

anything, you just try hard. Make yourself easy, approachable, and you will get what you want. And even if they are swearing at you, you shouldn't take any notice because **you want something**, so you have to slow down in order to get it. Life is difficult so we should not rush about. We should stop and think rather than jumping into confusion.



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