‘Ordinary Light’ a poignant memoir that focuses on daughter’s faith and relationship with mom

Book Review
By Tracy K. Smith. Alfred A. Knopf. 352 pp. $25.95.

BY DR. GLENN ALTSCHULER
SPECIAL TO THE FLORIDA COURIER

In her poem, “The Ordinary Life,” Tracy K. Smith reflects on the meaning of slogging through the weight of the everyday, even when you’re tired. “Just once,” she muses, it would be nice “to start out early, free from memory and lighter for it. Like Adam on that first day: alone but cheerful, no fear of the maker, anything his for the naming, nothing to shirk from, nothing to shirk, no lot to carry that wasn’t by choice.”

Maybe “just once.” In Ordinary Light, a memoir of her coming-of-age, however, Smith, whose book of poetry, Life on Mars, won the Pulitzer Prize in 2012, takes a stand in favor of naming the events, “even the most awful events, making up a life,” sifting through them from nuance and meaning, and facing them.

“Telling my story,” she maintains, and establishing a sense of continuity between the life she is now leading and the one she has lived “is both a prayer for power and the answer to that prayer.”

Uneasy relationship
Smith was born in Massachusetts and raised in Fairmont, Calif. by a family with deep roots in Alabama. After he retired from the Air Force, her father worked as an engineer in Silicon Valley. Her mother stopped teaching to raise her five children.

Written with her own daughter in mind, “Ordinary Light’ is about the loving but at times uneasy relationship between Tracy and Kathryn Smith.

Possessed “of a quiet refinement and pointing herself to a future not even she could have named,” her mom, Tracy speculates, may have changed her name from Kathleen to avoid the extra syllable (Kath-a-leen) southerners from red-dirt country roads often added.

Although as an adult Kathryn often “spoke the language of racial deference,” she was proud that she had carpooled and walked to school for a year during the Montgomery Bus Boycott.

A mother’s faith
Most of all, Mrs. Smith was a devout Baptist, who asked Tracy to say over and over again “I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me” – and was so sure of an afterlife that she told her children to bury her in a simple pine box and not to visit her grave because she wouldn’t be there.

In “Ordinary Light,” Tracy explores her attempts to claim the faith into which she was born without becoming like the Christians “whose world were, by my estimation, too tiny, circumscribed by a few arcane commandments and deliberately impenetrable mysteries. The ones who voted against progress, who feared sciences, the ones who got married and lived tucked inside their houses.” And who lumped her “in the same unholy soup with people who denied God’s existence outright.”

Exploring race, culture
And she examines the impact of race on her understanding of herself, her family, and her communities. The television programs “Gettin’ To Know Me” and “The Cosby Show,” she writes, taught her that things her friends would have found odd (like having your scalp greased and hair braided) were not unusual and gave her something to decipher or on which to project the things she understood about happy Black families.

Smith also describes what it felt like to be asked “Don’t you wish you were White?,” to encounter an “Afro-Am” curriculum at Harvard, read Ellison, Hughes, Hurston, Baldwin, Toomer, Wright, DuBois, and Malcolm X, “consider a thing called Black Consciousness,” attend Black Student Association meetings, and cultivate
Still searching
Tracy Smith acknowledges that she is still searching – and beginning to ask questions she never asked her mother (or anyone else). But she has discovered through her favorite poets and her own writing that a life “is made up of what happens and what is lost.”

Looking back, we “recover” those moments, at first with untrained eyes, “but if we hang there for a while longer, we can step into a different kind of gaze, one capable of seeing what is absent, longed for, what has been willed away or simply forgotten.”

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