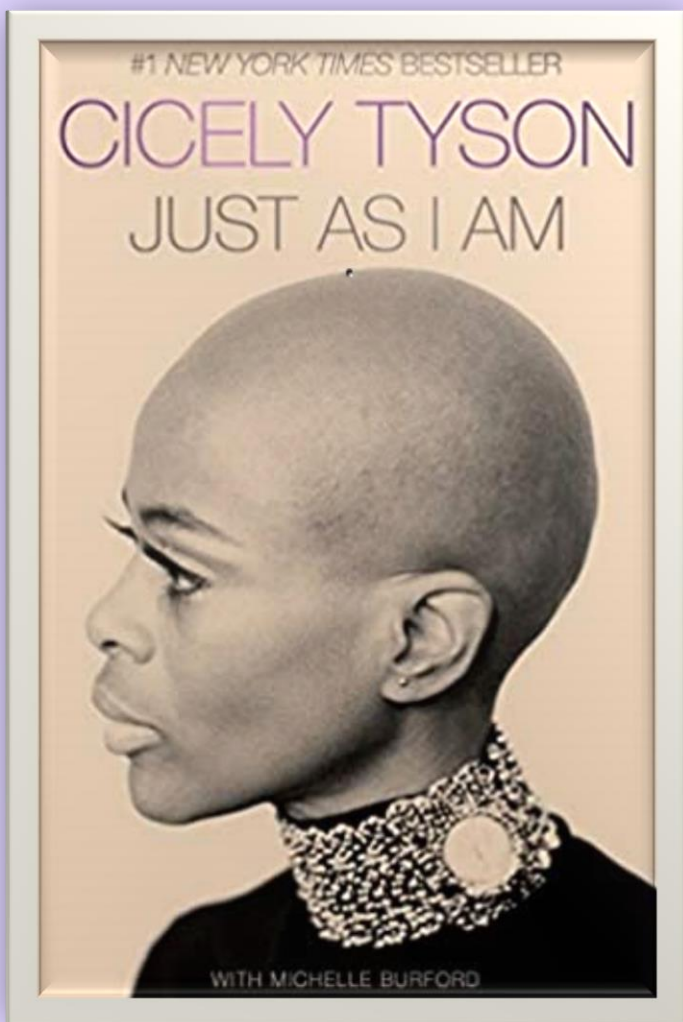


## Allison's Book Corner March 2021

***Just As I Am*** by Cicely Tyson  
(HarperCollins 2021)

Someone recently told me of the Latin phrase *amor fati*. It means a love of one's fate. It is a philosophy of embracing everything in one's life, including suffering and loss, as good or at least as *necessary*. *Amor fati* fully describes how actor Cicely Tyson viewed her long, full life.



There are memoirs and then there are MEMOIRS. This one falls in the latter category. I was overwhelmed by Cicely Tyson's life story. I think within the black community I took her for granted. Whenever I saw her on television or in a movie, I knew she would deliver a great performance. She was acting until the day she died this past January. It felt like she would be with us forever. I never considered her origins, nor how she came to be the star everyone seems to know. I *did* think about her in relation to the great jazz musician Miles Davis; I knew she had been married to him, because my father owns the Miles Davis album with her photograph on the cover. Within the black community there was a rumor of it being an abusive marriage. Unfortunately, we learn it was not merely a rumor, but sadly true.

Cicely Tyson was 96 years old when she left this earth. To have lived that long and have seen that much as an American black woman is significant. The reader is struck with how this one person's life encapsulated the breadth and depth of the full black experience of growing up in this country. Cicely had a front row seat witnessing the struggle of the civil rights movement and even portrayed Coretta Scott King in a television mini-series. To prepare for the role she spent treasured time with Mrs. King. She began her career as an actress alongside many others who became famous and beloved by many. Cicely

called Sidney Poitier, Diahann Carroll and Maya Angelou close friends. The personal stories that she shares are so much fun to read. As a native New Yorker it was a pleasure to read about her childhood in Harlem, and about her time as a young career woman and actress in New York City. She went from living in Harlem to the Upper West Side, finally calling the Upper East Side home. Instead of running in her youth to the dorm rooms of her friends into wee hours of the night (as many of us did), she ran to her friends' apartments. And it was during one of those midnight visits that the Dance Theatre of Harlem was born.

There are many great secrets to be unearthed in this book. I will not give them all away. It will not surprise anyone that she experienced racism, misogyny, sexual harassment and unwanted "touches" by lecherous men in the industry. Through it all she persevered.

The Tyson clan was full of multitalented strong people. Cicely admittedly did not sing too well, but she mastered the piano. Her cousin was the great concert pianist Don Shirley, subject of the 2018 movie "The Green Book." How wonderful to see him make an appearance in these pages.

As a black woman, I could relate to so many things she shared in this book: her family's values, the foods she ate when she was young, having her hair braided as a child, growing up in the black Christian church. However, in a life so full and rich, there are things that all people of different backgrounds can find relatable.

Cicely Tyson did not come from wealth. Her parents arrived at Ellis Island from the Caribbean. They worked hard to achieve their dreams. One of the undergirding themes in her life is that it is never too late to follow your passion. She did not become an actor until she was 30 years old - "late" within the industry. Her agent immediately deducted ten years from her age; her youthful appearance made that easy. Then there was her resolve to accept only roles that portrayed black women positively. Her life proves time and time again that a person does not have to sacrifice their values to do what they love.

The lessons from her life are too numerous to name here. I truly believe the way she dealt with Miles Davis's drug addiction could help many people -- even though ultimately the addict must want to save himself. Cicely Tyson went from stage to screen effortlessly and earned every award and accolade available for her hard work. There is even a performing arts school in New Jersey that bears her name. She was fully involved with the school and the students until her last day. Cicely Tyson's life story reads as a manual for life, but is written in an engaging, compelling style. I finished the book with ideas to incorporate into my own life.

Of course, if you live to 96, you outlive many of your friends and family members. The amazing singer Aretha Franklin was one of her dear friends. Her death made Cicely think about the impact of the loss of a legend on those who remain here. Cicely's reflection pertains also to her own life: "When great trees fall, we weep in unity with the forest - and we rejoice at the legacy that lingers."