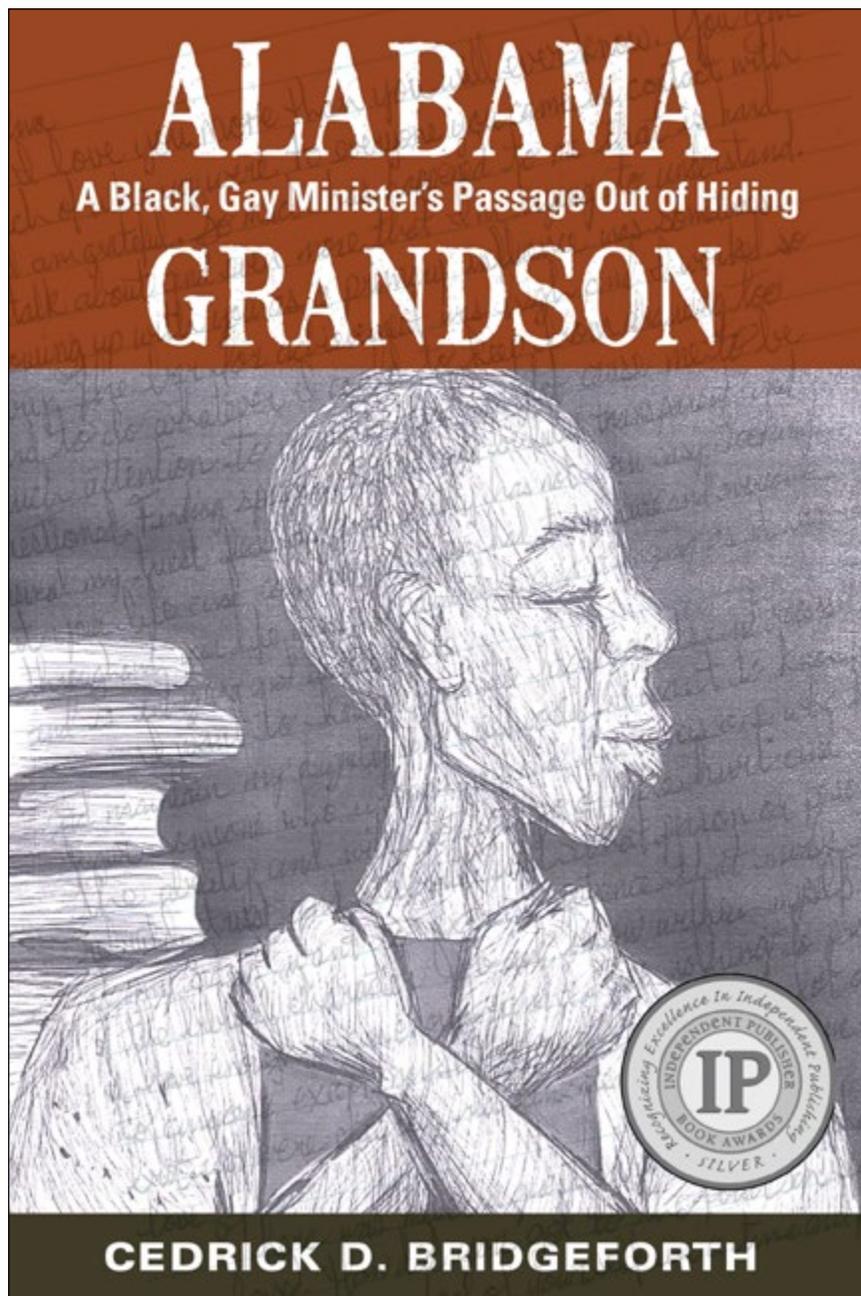


ALABAMA GRANDSON

A Black, Gay Minister's Passage Out of Hiding

by Cedrick D. Bridgeforth



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Los Angeles Book Festival Award: Honorable Mention

A tell-all memoir exposes a hidden life and hard-learned lessons

ALABAMA GRANDSON:
A Black, Gay Minister's Passage Out Of Hiding
by Cedrick D. Bridgeforth

Los Angeles, CA Southern. Black. Gay. Fatherless. Air Force Veteran. Ordained Methodist Minister. Master of hiding in plain sight. Cedrick Bridgeforth knows what it means to hold, hide, and wrestle with all of these identities. For years Cedrick had taken great pains to shield his full truth from the world. Then one day, at the height of his career, his entire universe came crashing down.

Equal parts preacher, poet, confessor, and consummate storyteller, *Alabama Grandson* chronicles Cedrick's hard-fought journey to come to terms with the hidden and sometimes conflicting parts of himself. Bookended by poignant letters to his grandmother, Cedrick vulnerably depicts the suffering caused by denying his truth:

*You were the most influential person in my life. Yet as much as I admired and appreciated you,
I did not trust you enough to say to you: "I am gay."*

Written over three decades after his grandmother's death and at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic and rise of the Black Lives Matter movement, *Alabama Grandson* asks as many questions as it answers.

This memoir brings readers along a compelling and multidirectional journey into the past in order to point the way forward. All the while, Cedrick elegantly models that there are different paths to living a fully authentic life and different ways of being a leader and agent of change in today's world.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Cedrick D. Bridgeforth, EdD, is an ordained minister, author, educator, executive coach, consultant, public speaker, and the founder of 20/20 Leadership Lessons. A native of Decatur, Alabama, Cedrick is a U.S. Air Force veteran and holds a Bachelor's degree in Religion from Samford University, a Master of Divinity Degree from the Claremont School of Theology, and a Doctorate Degree in Organizational Leadership from Pepperdine University. He is a former District Superintendent in the California-Pacific Conference of The United Methodist Church and served as Director of Academic Programs at the Ecumenical Center for Black Church Studies at the University of La Verne. Prior books include *Thoughts and Prayers* and *20/20 Leadership Lessons: Seeing Visions and Focusing on Reality*.

AUTHOR STATEMENT

This book began as a series of letters to my maternal grandmother. Although she died in 1989, I have fond and profound memories of her presence, the aromas in her kitchen and the life lessons that rolled effortlessly from her tongue. I have lived as a Black man born in the rural south, and one who claimed Christianity as the religion of my birth and as of my own choosing. My decision to fully embrace my identity as a same-gender loving, queer, gay, or homosexual man has ebbed and flowed between being silent about it and fighting for spaces to fully exclaim it.

I did not realize how much I had to lose until I lost it all. In taking the painful journey of putting my life back together, it was obvious that who I had portrayed myself to be was never going to last. I had to find a way to be authentic in expressing my fullest and truest identities, and know that the contradictions that come together to form me have always been present and will always be the best parts of my story. This story intersperses the lessons taught by my grandmother, but they were learned through the living of my life in search of meaning and purpose through service of others. My hope is that by telling my story, others will make connections with their motivations for living and take inventory of spaces and places where they are not being honest about who they are out of fear of rejection, ridicule, or ruin. My story is not your story and my journey is not your journey, but my grandmother's lessons are for the living of lives that matter in these most turbulent of times.

ENDORSEMENTS

Alabama Grandson reviews more than just a gay man's coming out experience. It's the story of how family heritage passes along values and approaches to life that remain vivid, relevant, and powerful under the most challenging conditions. It's a powerful story of the South, of love, of black men and oppression, and of self-realization that leaves readers thinking long after Bridgeforth's story concludes, with another powerful letter to his grandmother celebrating his journey.

—DIANE DONOVAN, *Midwest Book Review*, Senior Reviewer

I have known Cedrick for many years but never knew the level of silent suffering he was experiencing in hiding as a Black, gay minister. I applaud the courage demonstrated on the pages of *Alabama Grandson* and hope this book will encourage others suffering from the fear of rejection and humiliation to embrace life fully while taking steps to live in the open. The truth is always the right thing to speak and this book is a manifesto of love and truth.

—DR. RUDY RASMUS, pastor, humanitarian and author of *Love. Period. When All Else Fails*

With heart-wrenching vulnerability, Cedrick Bridgeforth has crafted a beautiful and riveting narrative. It reveals how personal integrity and character develop through black gay self-acceptance and deep, nurturing, love by family. This spiritually enlivening journey contains both excruciating, betrayal-filled life lessons and awe-inspiring examples of his non-judgmental, compassionate care for others.

—TRACI WEST, PHD, Professor of Christian Ethics and African American Studies

[*Alabama Grandson*] is a page turner. I could not put it down. With each chapter I clutched my pearls, busted a gut laughing, and wept with his pain. This book is a must read for all who seek to embrace and understand our LGBTQIA brothers and sisters. My brother Cedrick comes out of the closet like an educational cyclone with this book. After reading it you will be both blown away and enlightened, you cannot remain the same. —REV. DR. SHERON PATTERSON, author of *The Love Clinic*

Alabama Grandson is a testament to the love that Cedrick Bridgeforth has for his family, his church, and ultimately, himself. This book is an exploration of identity that allows the reader to truly feel the impact of faith and acceptance on the life of a gay Black man from Alabama.

—ANGELIQUE C. HARRIS, Founding Director of the Center for Gender and Sexualities Studies,
Marquette University

Cedrick's writing is full of compelling stories that give you a leans into what it's like carrying a secret in silence. His stories capture each moment in a way that lets you inside his mind, heart and soul. This book is a courageous journey of healing in the pursuit of freedom and wholeness. Cedrick refers to it as a "passage out of hiding" but it's that and much more . . .

—ROMAL TUNE, author of *Love Is an Inside Job: Getting Vulnerable with God*

BOOK EXCERPTS

Dear Grandma,

I have some secrets I need to share with you. I'm on my way to the cemetery to spend time with you as I do each time I return to Alabama. Yet this time is different. Now, more than three decades after your passing, we face a global pandemic, civil unrest, and economic collapse. The current climate is so unlike any other I have known that leaving anything undone seems careless.

On the short walk from my car to your gravesite across the ankle high Kentucky bluegrass and Bermuda strands, I'm consumed with anguish. Would you appreciate who I have become? Would you accept me or would you rebuff me? You were a wife, mother, grandmother, great-grandmother, sister, aunt, cousin; you were Southern Baptist, working class, conservative. You had a sixth-grade education. You were a seamstress, a midwife, and a great cook. You were impeccable with housework, a wiz in the garden, thrifty, a generous giver. Yet you never came across as a complex person. You were settled and secure in who you were.

I crave a similar clarity and confidence in my own life. But instead, I have struggled to embrace my own identities and celebrate my existence.

I learned to lie about who I am. I learned to hide in plain sight. I faltered in intimate relationships and felt like an imposter in my professional realm. And finally, it all caught up with me. Several "dark nights of the soul" experiences culminated on a single day in 2015 and my whole world came tumbling down. I felt abandoned by the church and by close friends. All I had left was my faith in God and my hope that my life experiences and your imparted wisdom would sustain me.

Now, your voice melds back into my memories as I look across the great expanse of what was a pasture during my youth and a cotton field during yours. You were the most influential person in my life. Yet as much as I admired and appreciated you, I did not trust you enough to say to you: "I am gay."

I look down at the little plot of clay that holds your body and imagine introducing myself to you and filling in the blanks of who I have become. I hear your voice say, "Don't get that red clay on those white soles of your shoes unless you want everybody to know where you've been." I stoop down and scoop up a handful of that red earth and cup it in the palms of my hands. I let it sift between my fingers like sand through an hourglass. You lived over seventy years and yet never traveled farther than about a hundred miles from this place on earth where you now rest. Your world was so small and yet you knew so much about life.

When all of that settled upon my mind, a primal battle began within. In one instant I was flattered and intrigued. In the next, I was ready to turn and bolt out the door.

Reggie and I eventually made peace with the fact that our best option was that of friendship. We loved to laugh, shop, watch movies, and cook together, but he wanted someone who was ready to make a lifetime commitment and I was not at that point in my life. He was the type of guy most people would move heaven and earth to have as their life partner. He checked all the right boxes. There was one problem that I have not been able to work through in all my years of living, dating, and undergoing intense therapy. He did not have pretty feet. They weren't Robin-Givens-in-*Boomerang* bad but he did have one black toenail on his left foot. The moment I saw that, I knew the best I could offer was friendship.

Reggie loved being around people so much that just shortly before he died, he invited me to come hang out with him and a few friends at the Mondrian Hotel on Sunset. I told him I had plans with some friends visiting from out of town.

He said, "Tell those queens Reggie is more important than those boys they are planning to chase in WeHo. You better get over here." He insisted that I come and that I bring them with me.

When my friends arrived to pick me up for our night out in West Hollywood, I told them we needed to make a quick stop by a friend's kickback on Sunset. I explained that my friend had been ill for a while and was feeling much better. He liked doing nice things for himself and others, so getting this swank suite overlooking the city was his way of healing himself and bringing joy to those around him. My friends did not know Reggie, but when they walked into that suite it was as though he had known them since kindergarten.

We never made it to West Hollywood that night. Most would have been content in a regular suite with a city view, but Reggie booked the penthouse. It was Reggie in every way, with plush white furnishings and pops of color throughout. There were tall, clear vases of long-stemmed white roses adorning every table. The music was kept at a low volume but there was no mistaking the rousing beat and rumble of house music. We spent our evening there laughing, dancing, and listening to one another's stories.

It wasn't long after that night at the Mondrian that I received word that Reggie was gravely ill and was at Cedars Sinai Hospital.

At that point, Reggie had fallen in love with a wonderful man named Oliver. It was Oliver who called to tell me Reggie was sick again. He also warned me that Reggie's mother was not permitting any visitors. I dropped everything and raced to the hospital. Once there, I circumvented the no-visitor rule put in place by Reggie's mother by stepping into my clergy role and asking the hospital chaplain to assign me to that ward. She made it possible for me to get into Reggie's room and spend a few quiet moments alone with him. I thanked him for always making me feel and know I was special. I thanked him for being a true and loving friend. I thanked him for showing me how to be a better man.

QUESTIONS FOR CEDRICK

1. Why did you write the book?

I wrote the book as a means of sharing a story that has many facets and intersections that I believe will speak to the struggles, triumphs, and realities many individuals who live with seemingly incongruent ideals and pursuits can relate to. It was a way of telling my own story by filling in the gaps and holes that I learned to keep hidden or to pretend did not exist. I wrote this book as my own declaration of freedom—an emancipation proclamation for my own soul and anyone else who dares to tell their own truth with great resolve.

2. What will the reader take with them from reading your memoir?

The reader will take with them a sense of what it means to own one's choices, application of lessons learned in childhood that developed in adulthood, and a real-life example of someone who failed and faltered but still found the faith and fortitude needed to find himself and journey onward in pursuit of purpose and happiness.

3. How was your experience writing your life story?

The experience of writing about my own life required me to come to grips with parts of it I had long forgotten or never cared to share. It helped me reach out to folks, even if only in memory, and extend forgiveness and seek it as well. I was able to see how key lessons taught under an ordinary maple tree in my grandparent's front yard set me on an extraordinary journey in life. I connected many disconnected stories and found solace in knowing I did not have all the answers but I had grown and experienced enough not to shy away from the tough questions.

4. What was the hardest part about writing this book?

The hardest part about writing this book was pushing away the voices of my family and friends who would be uncomfortable with my perspective or with my even venturing to tell many of the stories in this book. I wondered what they would say or how they would act toward me after reading it. When I put that aside and claimed this story as my own reckoning with the truth, the pain I needed to feel came and went just as efficiently as the shame and guilt I felt when I re-read some of the passages and realized how some might judge me.

5. Why is your story so important to share?

This story is important to share because it touches on the fabric of life and shows how matters of race, gender, religion, spirituality, education, politics, family structure, and sexuality are woven together and cannot be tugged upon for too long or with too much force lest it come unraveled. Boys, particularly Black, gay, or non-traditionally masculine males need to see that they can overcome obstacles without losing who they are. There is a need for more leaders and public figures to be honest about what happened before they arrived on the scene. I hope to challenge others to be vulnerable and transparent with their uncomfortable truths and disconcerting, intersecting identities so we can normalize what we have been taught to believe is abnormal in us.

6. What advice do you have for people in similar situations?

My advice to people who find themselves in similar situations to those in this book is to rely on the foundational lessons that those who love you deeply have imparted to you. Trust your gut and know that you are smart, strong and important enough to fight for, even if you are the only one doing the fighting. That is also true if you find yourself fighting yourself to be more patient and compassionate with yourself. I have found a kinder and gentler approach to express to myself through this process and plenty of therapy.

7. What was one of the most surprising things you learned in writing your books?

After writing the book I learned that the story I have heard and repeated throughout my life is not true. I was not born pre-maturely. I was born full-term, but was a sickly baby and spent several weeks in the hospital. The doctor told my mom that I was going to “expire” and that brought great distress to her when she realized what “expire” meant. That was a huge learning. Another thing I learned in writing this book is that I have lived an amazing life and I have engaged with people far beyond my assumed station throughout my life. I believe the reflection here is that I learned early on to speak to people with respect and honor because of the way my grandmother inspired and instructed me to do. I thrived in the military and found my way into religious and secular spaces as one able to lead and organize people. That all stems from my ability and willingness to listen to what I believed was good advice and to employ it beyond any one circumstance, but to adapt and overcome as needed.

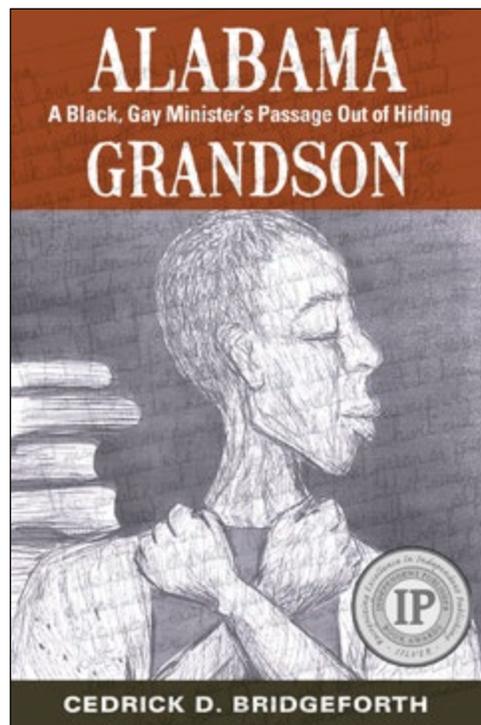
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