

GRIEVING

AN ANTIRACIST TAKE ON

WHILE

OPPRESSION AND SORROW

BLACK



BREESHIA WADE

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Grieving While Black

An Antiracist Take on Oppression and Sorrow

Breeshia Wade



North Atlantic Books
Berkeley, California

Praise for Grieving While Black

“Grieving While Black expands the notion of grief beyond its quick association with death to examine all of the spiritual and psychological tolls of racism and sexism. By drawing on her experiences as a birth doula and chaplain, Breeshia Wade complicates grief itself by exploring different forms of loss while also imagining a path toward healing. A bracing, illuminating read.”

—BRIT BENNETT, AUTHOR OF THE NEW YORK TIMES BEST
SELLERS *THE VANISHING HALF* AND *THE MOTHERS*

“This is a remarkable book, written bravely, wisely, and honestly, for all of us. Page after page, I learned about grief, race, and justice—and, most importantly, about liberation. I will return to Grieving While Black for the rest of my life.”

—JOAN HALIFAX, PHD, ZEN TEACHER, ANTHROPOLOGIST,
SOCIAL ACTIVIST, AND ABBOT OF UPAYA ZEN CENTER

“Breeshia Wade has written a moving testament to the power of grief and healing at the intersection of generational loss, race, and sexuality. This book is a must-read for anyone looking to enact compassionate antiracism in their activism and in their lives.”

—SARAH VALENTINE, PHD, AUTHOR OF *WHEN I WAS WHITE*

“As Black people, one of our widest gateways to freedom is our very own grief. In the way many Black women have stood as protectors and have held out their hands, Wade stands at this gateway, arms open, inviting us into a meadow where we can take our time, acknowledge our loss, and allow our grief to lead us into wellness. She asks pointed questions that will take you below the surface of things and into the dark watery abyss that is filled with the medicine we need. Take your time and sip on this one.”

—ZENJU EARTHLYN MANUEL, AUTHOR OF *THE DEEPEST PEACE*
AND *THE WAY OF TENDERNESS*

“Breeshia Wade has given us an important book. She speaks with deep

awareness and compassion, and from intimate knowledge about grief and chaplain work with the grieving.

—Taigen Dan Leighton, guiding Dharma teacher of Ancient Dragon Zen Gate in Chicago, and author of Faces of Compassion and Zen Questions

“Grieving While Black emerges from the depths of the writer’s soul—as a human being, a Black woman, a Southern-Baptist-raised practicing Buddhist, and advocate, guide, and caretaker for families who are in various states of emotional dishevelment. Her words come from the heart, from her experience helping others to attend to their grief. In her mission, Breeshia Wade has answered a calling. At a moment in human history where so many people are awakening to racial injustice, this book is a valuable resource to help us cultivate compassion, grieving, and healing together.”

—STEPHEN MURPHY-SHIGEMATSU, LECTURER IN COMPARATIVE STUDIES IN RACE AND ETHNICITY, STANFORD UNIVERSITY, AND AUTHOR OF *FROM MINDFULNESS TO HEARTFULNESS*

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To Mary ...

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Preface

When I was in undergrad, I initially majored in cultural anthropology because it allowed me to study culture, communities, and aspects of human nature. But anthropology is a social science, and I found that trying to examine human nature through a scientific lens was a painful process: human experience can be neither replicated nor recorded with accuracy. We can observe communities, but life cannot be quantified and is not predictable. As a burgeoning anthropologist, I began to look at myself as the scientific instrument through which the experience of others would be conveyed. However, unlike an Erlenmeyer flask, I could not be sterilized before each experiment—my own life experiences would always contaminate the way I perceived the experiences of others.

My approach to this project is informed by who I am. I can neither feign objectivity nor distance myself from what I have inherited and who I am called to be. I am a Southern Baptist–raised Black woman and practicing Buddhist from Chester, SC. I have written on a topic very close to my heart, a topic that has permeated my experience as a human being and as a Black woman observing the unspeakable tragedies committed by and against a people—tragedies kept alive by silences haunting generations, memories recorded in bodies restless and weary, all waiting to be spoken. When I heard these ghosts knocking in the closets of my unconscious, I was afraid to answer for fear of the questions they might bring. What unwanted light in my mind would be shed on a community that is already so laden with brokenness and shame? Who was I to disturb the voices of generations buried for the sake of our—of my—survival, and who was I to build on top of these voices a life where the past no longer threatened to undo the present? But I chose my life over fear. When I opened the door and listened, I learned that these ghosts were not our enemies, but our friends. And although many of them bore truths that cracked the rocky foundation of my own identity and perception, they offered hope. “We are here to heal.”

We can ignore the knocking of these ghosts of grief so that we don’t have to look them in the face, but we can’t avoid the impact of the haunt, or what our fear and sadness causes us to inflict upon the people around us. We have a moral obligation to attend to our own grief and to interact responsibly with the grief of

others. My intention in writing this book is not to provide coping mechanisms or short-term “fixes” for the grief we experience throughout our lives. This book is meant to elucidate grief in all of its forms and to provide a map back to ourselves that allows us to encounter our wholeness without fear while showing up to do the long-term work that needs to be done.

Introduction

*Now I'm bound for Mt. Zion, way out on the hill
Said I'm bound for Mt. Zion, way out on the hill
And if anybody makes it, surely I will.*

—SOUTH CAROLINA BLACK BAPTIST HYMN

Often when people imagine what it means for Black lives to matter they focus on the explicit death of Black people, like those caused by police violence. Almost every system of injustice within the United States is either founded upon or informed by anti-Blackness, including racism and white supremacy. Consequently, there are a myriad of ways that anti-Blackness ensures that Black folks are not meant to live, let alone thrive. Many of my readers likely participate in the destruction of Black lives despite their political and social leanings—unwittingly and against their best intentions. At its core, anti-Blackness relies upon neither our consent nor our awareness to extract participation.

White supremacy attempts to pervert Black life into a living death through the destruction of possibility, where individual flaws that would naturally be a fleeting moment, a failing, becomes failure—an all-encompassing state of being. I am intentional about not attaching the term “failure” to a specific action or endeavor, because our relationship with failure, as opposed to failing, already evokes a visceral reaction. Our minds and bodies experience failure as an absolute without it being attached to anything specific, which is why depression feels so abysmal; and we spend so much of our lives avoiding the feeling of failure or being labeled a failure at anything.

Black people don't just face death at the barrel of a policeman's gun or within our medical system. Life is taken from us on a daily basis, through housing discrimination; through the inability to get or maintain a job that allows us to pay rent, have health insurance, and buy food; and through under-compensation.

After spending years working in environments that were toxic, at best, I found a company where I felt I could thrive. I'd joined this company in the middle of a pandemic that was wreaking disproportionate havoc on Black communities, right before the eruption of worldwide protests defending Black lives. This company wasn't actively hiring when I applied for the role, but I applied anyway, despite

the fact that many businesses were laying people off. I got the job. I knew that I'd be good at this role, and it felt nice to experience mutual recognition between myself and a company.

Despite my aptitude, hard work, and conviction, I found myself struggling significantly. After five weeks, I began reassessing what was wrong.

I was in a customer-facing role in a business-to-business (B2B) company, and I was constantly encountering aggression, dismissal, and disrespect the moment I introduced myself over the phone as "Breeshia." After a few attempts to stumble over my name, decision makers would typically decide that the conversation was not worth having and would rudely end it. Being Black in America means that I'm always questioning whether or not a situation would have happened differently if I were white. The grief isn't so much in whether or not the answer is unequivocally yes, but in the fact that so many life experiences cause me to consider this question—in the extra mental energy this consideration saps throughout the day.

In any case, I imagine that I was particularly sensitive to instances of outright aggression toward me, which was heightened when I spoke my name. Tonal shifts after my introduction. Demands that I never call again. Accusatory questions. I was witnessing the violence and dismissal of Black women's lives daily (e.g., Breonna Taylor, Iyanna Dior, J. Cole's foolish song), and then I was calling white people and hoping not to be dismissed.

To be sure, some of this type of behavior simply comes with my role. But the degree to which my endeavors were marked by failure seemed to differ from some of my colleagues, and it was threatening to deteriorate my life outside of work. As thoughtful as my company was, I knew that businesses are driven by metrics and that they couldn't carry me as dead weight forever. If society would not accept Breeshia in a professional role, then my job, and thus my ability to survive, was under threat. Other people's failure to recognize and respond to me as a human being with something to offer meant that their vision of me had the capacity to influence my personal life by ensuring that I struggled to afford rent, to afford marriage, to plan and provide for a family.

* * *

So I flattened myself into who white business owners needed me to be: I became "Bree," and I removed pictures of Breeshia with her locs and Black

features from my email and profiles. Sometimes I gave my voice a lilt, adjusted my vowels, made myself as telephonically white-passing as I could. Other times I would close my eyes and conjure the image of a Black person that would feel more familiar. “Bree lives in a high rise,” I whispered to myself. “Bree brunches with her white girlfriends. She played lacrosse in college.” I could be Black, maybe, but there was a certain type of Black that they needed to imagine me to be in order to form even the most casual of bonds.

Bree could just as easily be their daughter’s best friend or the daughter of a good Black friend. But Breeshia could never be any of those things. It didn’t matter how well-spoken, well-educated, thoughtful, or resourceful I was—it didn’t matter that I could articulate their problems and bring them solutions—Breeshia was not fit to be given an opportunity. To prove herself. To exist. And therefore, implicitly, to make a living in order to survive.

Within two days, Bree had accomplished what Breeshia couldn’t do in five weeks: she booked multiple sizable accounts. Bree went weeks without experiencing the slightest bit of aggression, even from people who had previously been hostile. Those same people became open to continued conversation and began connecting her to their business partners and colleagues. Bree was entrusted with the cellphone numbers of CEOs without suspicion or hesitation.

All of this was happening as companies were beginning to respond to the social pressure to declare their stance on Black lives. Every day, my inbox was flooded with emails from one CEO and founder or another declaring their solidarity with the Black community. And every day my stomach turned as I read their empty statements, knowing that these very people were priding themselves on their comfort doing business with Bree.

* * *

I have frequently experienced violence as a result of my gender and my skin color, from the white woman who refuses to put money directly in my hand when I make a purchase at the store to the Black men who feel entitled to sexually harass me because I’m the only Black woman available in a sea of white. I love my full name—Breeshia Latte’ Wade, and I feel proud of who I am. My colleagues and friends call me Breeshia. Unfortunately, I am not the only Black person who has had to contort myself in order to survive.

What white supremacy cannot accomplish physically through death and assault, it seeks to accomplish spiritually. Systemic racism was meant to destroy Black people's relationship to ourselves, to each other, and—most important for its own survival—to white people. The very fabric of our country was premised upon Black people's expendability: we were brought here to die. White people were never meant to be in meaningful relationship to us because they were never meant to see us as people. Superficial proximity was necessary, but genuine connection was not in the source code.

I know this in the moments of both greatest joy and greatest pain in my own relationship. There are moments in which my wife and I look into each other's eyes from both inches and miles apart, separated by a short and endless gulf that neither of us can do anything about, that white supremacy did to us, and these moments feel insurmountable. We were never meant to be what we are to each other, everything in our society was built to guarantee it, and it makes sure to remind us in little jarring moments of empathetic failure and huge earthquakes of mistrust. I've lost count of the moments I've feared that my wife's courage would not suffice because we both know that in this system no action will ever be enough. But we keep showing up anyway, knowing that success is fleeting, at best, and failure always lingers on the horizon.

This moment has galvanized white people for reasons I still don't comprehend, though I welcome what hope it brings. But white people who are invested in racial justice must come to terms with their relationship to grief. If one looks at the root of anti-Blackness, what it has done and what it aims to do, how does one not feel burdened by the tears of generations? How does one not touch the very heart of grief? And if one has had such an honest, unveiled encounter with loss, how can one fundamentally remain unchanged? I've witnessed many white allies and activists who quickly become overwhelmed, bogged down, discouraged, and exhausted; they are experiencing a fragment of disempowerment in a system that caters to them. For the first time, they are touching the weight of the grief that Black people carry on a day-to-day basis while functioning within a system intrinsically meant to ensure that we remain under threat of extinction so that white people can thrive.

What's equally important is that white people come to terms with their relationship with failure. White people are not accustomed to living under the burden of impossibility, or of only one chance. Consequently, they do not know what it means to commit to something regardless of the outcome. White people committed to addressing anti-Blackness and racism must not only be willing to

fearlessly attend to their own grief; they must also accept the unequivocal reality of failure and still choose to keep going. White supremacy has destroyed countless lives over many lifetimes, and we will not see the end of it in this lifetime. Or the next. But we must keep going, even if it will never be enough, in the same way we choose to live fully in the moment, knowing that we are going to die.

PART 1

Spiritual Death

1

Grief as Spiritual Death

*A charge to keep I have,
A God to glorify,
A never-dying soul to save,
And fit it for the sky.
To serve the present age,
My calling to fulfill:
Oh, may it all my pow'rs engage
To do my Master's will!*

—CHARLES WESLEY, ADAPTED INTO *BLACK BAPTIST HYMN*

I am frequently asked how I ended up transitioning from a birth doula to a chaplain on the neonatal intensive care unit (NICU). As a doula, I have counted myself blessed to serve as an advocate, a guide, and a caretaker for families in various states of emotional dishevelment, most of which end in one of the happiest moments of people's lives. However, nothing in life is guaranteed: I have also served mothers who unexpectedly lost their children during labor. The experience of witnessing nine months of apprehension, preparation, and joy dissolve into unmitigated despair in a matter of moments pulled on something profound and unconditional in me. It inspired me to take a deeper look at the connection between birth and death, joy and grief.

I remember my first day on the NICU like it was yesterday. I walked the floors filled with so much self-doubt and fear, afraid to make a practice of people's lives and to perhaps cause irreparable harm that they would spend years, maybe even a lifetime, trying to undo. I held the current census in my hand to see who had been on the unit the longest in order to determine who would need a visit soon. Then I stopped by the nurse's station to get their assessment of high-risk patients. When I introduced myself as the new chaplain assigned to the unit, the nurses huddled around me to fill me in on the patients who were in highest need. As I left to follow up on the new leads, one nurse pulled me aside apprehensively to share with me a secret about one of these patients that she neither wanted nor knew how to keep inside.

There was an African American family down the hall who had just given birth to an infant expected to die within a day. The mother had known for many months that the child would not live long after he was born, but she had kept this a secret from the child's father in order to spare him further pain. The medical team and the mother's sister had also been aware of the child's viability for months, and now the nurses were finding it difficult to reach the child's father, because the fact that they had been withholding information from him made it difficult to support him.

When I walked into the room, the mother was sitting in a chair holding the baby, who was connected to all sorts of machines to keep him alive. She didn't look up at me, she just kept staring at her child, holding his hand, knowing that each second they spent together might be their last. When I reached into the corner to the hand sanitizer dispenser, I immediately looked down to see another woman—the mother's sister, sitting by the door. She stood up immediately to face me, blocking my access. I looked across the room and saw the child's father sitting in the back, teary eyed. He smiled weakly at me. He was isolated physically and spiritually in his grief as he—from a distance—watched his wife hold their child for the last time. I was so overwhelmed by all that I was experiencing and perceiving that I had forgotten to greet anyone as I entered. The mother's sister stood in front of me, waiting, as I stumbled to form words.

"I'm Breeshia, just a chaplain stopping by to introduce myself and see ..."

I wasn't able to finish my sentence before the sister cut me off. "We don't need you. Thanks." It was clear that she was simply trying to protect her sister's time with her child, but I wanted neither her defensiveness nor my fear to get in the way of this family getting something that they needed. I moved my head past the sister's shoulders and directed my next question to the mother and father, making a strong effort to hold eye contact with the dad.

"Mr. and Mrs. Thompson, would you like me to come in to offer support?"

The mother glanced at me briefly with gratitude in her eyes before looking down at her baby again. "No, thank you, sweetheart." I looked at the father again, the tears welling up in his eyes. I wanted to push past the sister and get to him in the back of the room, but I felt more than powerless—I felt helpless. His eyes told me that he needed someone in this moment, but his mouth did not want to contradict his wife. His voice shook as he spoke, "No, ma'am. Thank you."

As I left the room, the sister resumed her post by the door.

I had failed.

* * *

On some level, each of us knows what it means to dream, so we know what it means to experience the failure, grief, and disappointment of watching a dream fall down midflight. To lose a child, though, is to endure such a profound loss that it beggars description. There is an unfathomable sorrow that can't be conveyed to anyone who has never experienced or witnessed this type of grief. No words can capture what it means; there is neither peace nor comfort to be found in this suffering. The loss of a child leaves one's world utterly broken and incomplete. And so, we are left with the question: How do we take these mosaic pieces and paint an image of meaning? Because children, their lives—along with the dreams they represent, no matter how young or small—matter deeply. With inexplicable power and unconditional love, the universe and all its possibilities are what we carry in our wombs and hold in our hearts when we imagine a child. So young, and yet their lives capture the whole of time. And so their death sends our universe into irreconcilable chaos.

To this day, I haven't gotten used to the anxious desperation of nurses relieved to see a chaplain arrive when there are patients and issues that need "fixing," as if we possess an otherworldly ability to solve the powerlessness and discomfort associated with illness, death, and grief. This was never more true than on the NICU. I was still learning ways to replace the nurse's expectations with what I understood my role to be: a facilitator, a witness, a support system, and a guide for families. In many ways, I was as much a support for the medical team as for our patients, and I was just as in danger of falling headlong into their grief with them, taking on their projections out of fear of disappointing them and a desire to "save" them from their own bereavement. I was still learning to navigate the grief of everyone on the floor, including my own.

Mrs. Thompson was overwhelmed by love, for both her husband and her child, yet stifled by grief. She lied by omission out of love and fear of loss, desperately wanting to protect her loved ones from what she ultimately couldn't control. She wanted her husband to feel the love and joy of expecting a newborn child for as long as he could. She wanted to protect him from the feeling of powerlessness and failure that she was feeling as a parent who loved her child unconditionally but was nevertheless unable to save him. If she could not protect this child from the reality of death, the least she could do was protect her husband as best she could. But written on the face of her husband, this mother's protection looked an awful lot like isolation.

Grief can disconnect us from those we love, including ourselves. I imagine

that this must be what Mr. Thompson felt—disconnected from his wife and child, but not fully understanding why. Perhaps he felt trapped in his own suffering because he was afraid his grief was too much, that his own words and experiences needed to be stifled in order to make room for his wife's, lest he risk compounding her suffering. He no doubt wanted to protect both mother and child from the pain of separation that Mrs. Thompson had tried to spare him, but just like her, he was powerless all the same. I imagine that this experience shook the core of Mr. Thompson's identity, given that he was likely socialized as a man and a father to protect his family at all costs.

* * *

When I walked out, I could feel the nurses watching me. I tried to hold back my own tears and shame, knowing that I had allowed my own grief and fear of inadequacy to prevent me from supporting a family who really needed me. What is it about the loss of a child that touches on our grief in such a thorough and all consuming way? How often had my own grief impeded my ability to cultivate relationships with people, especially those experiencing profound difficulty? Why had I never noticed this before?

Why hadn't I tried harder to get to them?

Because I was afraid that I would not be taken seriously, that my lack of confidence would be apparent, that I would not know what to say, thus appearing to be incompetent. I was afraid of being rejected and unwanted. Above all, I was ashamed of making someone else's moment of suffering about me. I believed that the only way that I could be "helpful" was by fully erasing myself and my own needs as a human being in order to attend to the suffering of others. I didn't recognize the pervasive power dynamics behind the rhetoric of "helping." These relationships would always require my full presence because it was essential that I remain in an intentional relationship with the people who needed a chaplain. This made me a necessary component to each interaction. But I was neither a container nor a receptacle for their pain, which means that I did not have to become a void in order to store or *hold* it. I was simply creating space for them to recognize their own agency, to choose what they needed from our interactions, so they could heal. In other words, I was necessary, but not central.

There I was, someone who had been training for this moment—and many moments that came after it—via my work in a jail, a hospital, and even churches

back home. But instead of feeling like an expert, I felt my own baggage. Who was I to come into this room, into this situation, with hopes of alleviating suffering? I could feel the weight of imprisoned Black men I had served who sought to displace their powerlessness onto me by making me feel helpless and small as a woman. I could feel the weight of abused women who wanted me to reveal to them the mind of God. I began projecting the fear of weakness—of being simultaneously too much and not enough—every time I stepped into the room. I was terrified of being perceived as useless and less valuable than my medical team members because I was not able to solve their problems either medically or theologically. Even the medical team expected me to have a remedy for the patients' grief while I was still learning to navigate my own experiences. I had walked into the room feeling even more insecure about my role, my power, and my ability than when I had initially arrived. I had walked into the room with information that was unwanted, which would mean that I was unwanted.

* * *

Later that evening, my partner and I went out to dinner with a friend. She asked me about my first day on the NICU, but I was still processing and didn't want to talk about it. This friend had never experienced concrete loss in the form of death. In fact, she still had all of her grandparents, with whom she was close. Her parents were still married, and her family was supportive and loving. She had attended excellent schools and was making six figures as a financial consultant. Yet during dinner I noticed that despite the beauty of her life and all that she had accomplished, she was terrified of losing it all. She was working seventy-hour weeks while constantly anxious about promotions, the time she might take off, and how others might perceive or misinterpret the smallest actions, despite having everything she needed in the moment. I began to notice the same patterns in myself and my other friends. Society has given us markers of success, and we expect to see concrete, lasting results for all that we sacrifice and put in. We think that if we study hard enough, work long enough, know the right people, and sacrifice the right things at the right time, we will get the degree, position, and/or salary we deserve. So many people buy into this illusion while living its contradictions at every moment—struggling to network more, publish more, and learn more in order to stay “relevant,” lest we lose all we fought to “secure.”

When people hear the term “grief,” they frequently think about concrete loss

and trauma—a break-up, a departure, a death. This makes sense: *Merriam-Webster* defines “grief” as a “deep and poignant distress *caused* by or as if by bereavement,” a definition that emphasizes the causal connection between a finite event and a seemingly infinite feeling.¹ Something must have already *happened* to illicit grief, and that event must have taken place in the past. However, when looking at the origins of the term “grief”—from the Latin *gravare*, to burden—we can see that there is no reference to time or to cause at all. To grieve is simply to feel weighed down, to be made heavy, to experience mental suffering and deep sorrow. The feeling of grief doesn’t need a precipitating event, just a subtle awareness of the present moment and how that might impact the future. It is present in our saddest moments, like the passing of a loved one, and in our happiest moments, like the day we’re dropped off at college. It is connected to moments that have already passed, like a fight with our best friend, and to moments to come, like knowing we will one day lose someone close to us. Grief is knowing that we, too, will die. We can be at the height of our career, have a stable and healthy family, and have someone we love, and still feel grief, because we are aware of the reality of impermanence. And, for those of us who have experienced some form of trauma or loss, our awareness is even more acute.

¹Merriam-Webster, s.v. <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/grief>, emphasis added.

The predominant form of grief that I encounter in my work as a chaplain is the struggle to say goodbye. My patients and their families are searching for ways to come to terms with the inevitable, to celebrate and honor and mourn together while they can. When I first began working in the field, however, I noticed that what I struggled with most was saying hello. Whenever I extended my hand to knock on a patient’s door, I would feel intense anxiety, a fear of rejection that followed me into every room. I had always been comfortable with the grief already present in each person’s home, but the tangle of emotions that I brought with me was new and uncomfortable, and I soon recognized these emotions as my own grief. I was an aspiring writer, a care provider in an economy that didn’t value or reward my work, and an employee at an organization that withheld hours to coerce staff into compliance with unethical behaviors: I had been told no so many times that I lived in constant tension, waiting for the next one. My anxiety was a form of grief, a ward against any bad thing that could happen through the erection of my own preemptive barriers.

More often than not, we experience grief not as sadness, but as fear, anger, or

anxiety. Grief is bigger than what's already happened to us: it is connected to what we fear, what we love, and what we aspire toward.

Consequently, grief shows up in our relationship with each other, and with ourselves, in a variety of ways. I once cohosted a workshop with a mentor and former professor during a mindfulness retreat in Berkeley. The workshop covered the topic of grief in interpersonal relationships, specifically looking at how grief guides our most subtle actions, from avoiding intimate eye contact with strangers to fearing that other people will perceive our emotional vulnerability. Fear and grief are impeding our ability to build sustainable connections, and *avoidance* of fear and grief interferes with the ability to cultivate empathy, compassion, authenticity, and connection. During the second half of the workshop, I invited participants to reflect on an interpersonal relationship in which grief was present, looking beyond apparent expressions of grief to investigate relationships tinged by anger, jealousy, fear, disengagement, or indifference. One man and his wife discussed their experience of having been married for over four decades. They had recently begun examining how grief had frequently kept them from fully investing in each other over the course of their marriage because they each feared giving more than they received. Their fear of “giving too much” caused both parties to feel unfulfilled within the relationship. Each person was afraid of expressing love, expending energy, and dispensing resources for “nothing.” Even though love is a limitless resource, the ways that love is expressed and experienced—through money, time, and energy—are not. The result was a self-fulfilling prophecy: both spouses were unhappy in their marriage because they felt the consequences of the other person holding back. Both were waiting to receive what they were unwilling to give. Over time, each person began feeling devalued and suspicious of the other's intentions. They each felt a lack of love, respect, attention, and physical appreciation.

According to Maslow's hierarchy of needs, “love and belonging” are essential to the healthy development of a human being. It is no secret that relationships are a key means by which we come to understand ourselves, including our self-worth. Historically and presently, the threat of isolation has been used to regulate social behavior, from putting a kindergartener in time-out to shunning a loud-mouthed friend for spilling secrets to imprisoning people who violate laws. Although these are more concrete examples, our fear of being ostracized and alone is frequently manipulated in our day-to-day lives, causing us to behave in ways detrimental to our overall well-being in order to avoid immediate grief. Within capitalism, companies and organizations frequently prey on our fear of losing a sense of connection and social belonging. Many students and employees

have at some point experienced pressure to endure unreasonable expectations: sacrificing sleep, health, and time with family for extended periods in order to work long hours; compromising our core values and integrity in order to “get the job done” and make the company more money; and tolerating unhealthy working environments and toxic office dynamics. People often say yes to disregarding their own boundaries in these situations because they fear losing not only the support and approval of the people with whom they spend one third of their day but also the ability to pay for health insurance, food, shelter, and all the other things needed to survive. The opposite of survival is death—any time something is connected to our survival, it is implicitly connected to grief and fear of loss.

Because it is important to have the approval and support of the people we work with—considering the amount of time we spend with them—social pressure is often used to entice people to say yes even when their mental, physical, and emotional health are at risk. This is a nonconsensual dynamic rooted in fear of loss and rejection, and we carry it subconsciously not only into our working relations but also into our friendships and our familial and romantic relationships as well. When we try to please others, we aren’t honest about our own needs and expectations. Sometimes we don’t even know our own needs and expectations because we fear that by showing up honestly and fully we will risk losing access to connection, love, and belonging.

When we lose sight of our own sense of boundaries and agency, we have difficulty perceiving and respecting the agency and boundaries of others. We fail to say no and to protect our time and energy in case those boundaries cause rejection, and then expect others to do the same for us, subverting their own needs in deference to ours. Since we sacrifice so much of ourselves in order to be in relationship to other people, we can become disillusioned when they do not do the same. This, too, is grief. We begin to seek our needs not through honesty but through manipulation, a type of power play in which we deliberately fail to claim our own agency so that we can push accountability for our grief onto others. Our relationships become games of chess in which we are constantly interpreting ourselves and others not through open communication and recognition but through private scrutiny of the choices others are making in relation to us and what those choices reflect about us as people. Our own sense of self can thus become almost entirely dependent upon external feedback, and our relationships become tools for elevating our own needs at the expense of those of others.

* * *

The vast majority of the families I served on the NICU were Black Americans, followed by Brown Latinx. Black mothers are three times more likely than white mothers to die during labor, largely because hospital staff are less likely to credit Black women's reports about their own bodily experiences and pain levels, and our infant mortality rate is twice as high as that of white infants.² These statistics are no doubt amplified by how race, gender, and class impact medical care.

²Nina Martin and Renee Montagne, "Nothing Protects Black Women from Dying in Pregnancy and Childbirth," *ProPublica* (December 7, 2017), www.propublica.org/article/nothing-protects-black-women-from-dying-in-pregnancy-and-childbirth.

I once served a homeless African American mother Janeisha, whose daughter, Zora, had just been admitted to the NICU after Janeisha had given birth on the hospital's labor and delivery unit. Zora was transferred to the NICU to be placed on life support, based on Janeisha's insistence. Janeisha was understandably distraught because Zora had been declared brain dead, and Janeisha believed that the hospital staff had been negligent in their care and caused her child's suffering. In fact, she had threatened to sue the hospital, which put a surprising amount of fear into the hearts of her doctors and nurses—surprising given that I imagine that they are accustomed to such threats from distraught families. I had not been present for the child's birth since at the time I was solely functioning as a chaplain, not as a birth doula, but I made it a point to be present after I received the nurse's request for a visit.

After speaking with the nurses and doctors on both units, 98 percent of whom were white, I gathered a strong sense that the medical team unanimously believed that Janeisha's attempt to save her child was futile since the child had been deprived of oxygen for too long. By their calculations, Zora was certainly brain dead. However, despite their skepticism, Janeisha's persistence persuaded them to keep the child on the NICU until a test could be conducted to determine the child's brain activity—only to appease the mother. The team was certain of what they knew, and the mother could feel their bias and disbelief, but she fought for the life of her child as fiercely as any mother would. Her sense of powerlessness to protect Zora was likely amplified by the fact that she was a single woman, African American, and low income. She felt isolated and alone within this institution. She felt terrified that she needed to rely on a team that she ultimately distrusted to save her child, a feeling amplified by societal and

medical racial discrimination, presently and historically.

I was the only Black person on her team. The nurses and doctors had frequently described Janeisha to me as hostile and aggressive, but when I met with her, I saw only a mother scared of losing her child. Black women's anger is often interpreted in isolation from the suffering and grief that inform it. Anger is a stage of grief. Rage is the result of stifled agony. Janeisha was always honest and vulnerable with me, expressing that she trusted me because she could "feel a person's energy" when they walked into the room. Janeisha felt that I could see her and was there to support her, so she would share with me her fears and anxieties around protecting her child.

I learned that Janeisha had thought that she could never have a child. She had once been told by a gynecologist that she was infertile. Prior to that moment, she had always dreamed of having a little girl. The birth of her daughter felt nothing short of God's miracle. If God had given Zora to Janeisha as a gift, then she was going to fight for her daughter no matter what. She did not care if the child was disabled and would need help for the rest of her life—as Zora's mother, she was committed to sacrificing whatever was necessary so that Zora might live.

The day came to perform the test Janeisha had requested for brain function, and the medical team was still certain that the child would be brain dead. They wanted me nearby in case the mother became "belligerent" and unwilling to accept the news. I had never known Janeisha to be physically violent, but I showed up ready to support her. I wish I could say that I was surprised that the medical team would characterize a mother who was experiencing such loss and grief this way, when it was clear that what she desperately needed was support. Every action was perceived to be hostile, but she was merely scared. My identity as an African American woman was frequently used to soothe the situation when conversations became tense between the medical team and the patient, often because Janeisha would become agitated due to being stereotyped instead of listened to.

I stood in the room as the doctors and nurses informed her that the child was "almost" brain dead, a phrase that I had never heard before: as I understood it, someone was either brain dead or not. The medical team's insistence on their original theory, combined with the revelation of the test results, was the final crack in the foundation of trust between Janeisha and our team.

Almost six weeks went by, and it appeared that Zora was not making progress. Janeisha had asked me to stop by and pray for Zora daily, as well as talk to her,

so I did. Janeisha was determined to find a job and a place to live for her child, so she was not around as often as she wanted to be—she usually came at night, after I was gone. Soon she secured a decent-paying position and was able to move into low-income housing. She shared with me all of her plans to get back on her feet and provide stability for her child. I knew that the medical team was doubtful of her ability to support her daughter.

At one point, a seasoned nurse by the name of Susan, who had over fifteen years of experience with infant bereavement, pulled me aside privately to insist that I have a conversation with Janeisha, along with three other African American mothers who were fighting desperately to save their children, to tell them that “this is it.” This was the final stage. No more could be done. Susan felt that these families were unreasonable and too demanding in their expectation of saving their children, as if the love for one’s child has reasons or limits. Susan especially encouraged me to speak with Janeisha, who had been homeless at the time of her child’s birth and still had a way to go for financial security. Susan asked, “What’s she going to do to take care of that girl? She can’t afford it. She will end up in a facility being someone else’s problem. And even if she could care for her, Zora will never be able to work or support herself.” I cautioned Susan about the implications of tying a Black child’s body, value, and life to her ability to work. Susan was not interested in this discussion. I also cautioned Susan about how the actions and words of a mostly white medical team might be perceived by an African American mother, especially based on the conversations I had with Janeisha and other Black mothers on the unit. Susan responded by showing me an antiquated book that she uses to communicate with people of color, a book that detailed the characteristics and communication styles of people based on their race.

A few weeks later, I was called to be present during another meeting between a doctor and Janeisha. The doctor was explaining that Zora would never recover past her current condition. Yet during this meeting, I noticed that Zora was moving her toes. I had never seen this before, so I pointed it out to Janeisha, who began crying. Zora continued moving her toes throughout the meeting, and two weeks later moving her fingers and toes were a regular occurrence. A month later, she opened her eyes for the first time.

Janeisha did not have the same access to medical language as the team, so when she would use her own words to repeat what she heard, the team would assume that she didn’t understand and would talk down to her. As someone who was actively listening when Janeisha spoke, I was able to perceive that she did,

in fact, understand what was happening, but she simply used different words to describe it. She was understandably hurt that her moments of profound grief were constantly layered with racism and misrepresentation such that she always had to remain on guard and alert, never able to fully rest or focus on healing. When I would leave the room with the doctors and nurses, the conversations immediately became an “us” versus “her” situation, in which my role was assumed to be on the side of “us,” as someone on the medical team.

I was frequently looped in on conference calls about Janeisha in which medical team members would dismiss her concerns or stereotype her. I tried to speak with the team about race and the use of power in an already precarious situation, but I was dismissed. When I tried to push the point, one doctor began crying, saying that she knew that she had “good intentions” and her “heart was in the right place.” I perceived that by pushing harder I could isolate myself from the team, something I had witnessed happen previously with other chaplains. So I decided that it was better for me to be present with the families when they were experiencing these dynamics than absent, and I vowed to do what was in my control. I have no doubt that on some level, many of the doctors and nurses did have good intentions. But their social location protected them from simply facing, let alone taking responsibility for, the impact of their actions. The burden of their fear in facing their own grief as it related to power and privilege fell on a suffering Black mom, without her consent.

I had hoped for more empathy from the medical team. I witnessed the perpetual devaluation of Janeisha’s experience, and ultimately her and her child’s humanity, from the dismissal of Janeisha’s hope and excitement for her daughter’s recovery to the misrepresentation and fear of her grief in her darkest moments. But as a Black woman myself, I know what it means to be denied access to our own grief and humanity in order to make room for others to navigate *their* grief. I know what it means to be denied both empathy and the benefit of the doubt, yet to be expected to offer both to others—including our transgressors.

* * *

Many people view death and dying as concrete, physical transitions with discernible outcomes, and grief is perceived to be the direct consequence of tangible loss. However, death isn’t just one moment—it is a series of moments over a lifetime. Like many Black women, Janeisha did not just touch death

through the fear of losing her child. She experienced death through the reduction of her personhood, the denial of her humanity, and the loss of time. Grief is a spiritual death that occurs continuously throughout our lives, and our experience of it is informed by the various identities that determine our reception within our society.

A popular adage recited during times of loss and grief is that healing takes time. However, our path to healing heavily depends on what we do with that time. Acceptance is often the first step to healing after a loss, and time is needed in order to accept. The greater the loss, the more time we need to integrate it into our subjective experience. Our social location determines our access to time and thus to our ability to grieve and reintegrate after loss. It also determines our access to others onto whom we can push our grief.

When we fail to recognize the grief inherent in so many of our other emotions, we fail to engage honestly with our experience. Our lives are full of griefs, full of losses big and small, and every loss is a spiritual death. Neglecting that grief leads to spiritual decay, a rotting that attempts to plug its own holes with the wholeness of others. Too many of us are driven by grief rather than informed by it, allowing our fear of impermanence and powerlessness to justify our brutish disempowerment of others.

In this way, systems of injustice are built upon grief, and the grief caused by them begets more suffering and more injustice. When we are driven by our grief, we enact harmful power dynamics against others in order to avoid the reality of impermanence. The white woman who is terrified of Black liberation because it will mean that her children will have to compete equally, and possibly lose, in a race for resources is driven by the awareness of both her and her children's mortality, her preemptive grief and her fear. In order to extend her child's life, and her own, she willingly takes from Black mothers and children what she fears will be taken from her and hers. She actively deprives Black life of time so that her children experience more moments of connection, love, and joy in a life categorized by loss and impermanence. There are layers to grief, so Black women, LGBTQ+ folks, disabled folks, and others experience complex grief as a result of the layered trauma and time theft that we experience.

Cultivating an awareness of our grief takes significant courage. Many of us, myself included, are not honest with ourselves—let alone others—about the source of our anger and the subject of our fears. But grief is honest, and when we open up the opportunity for honesty, we allow fullness to come into our lives. We attract and maintain situations that heal. We give ourselves spiritual life. We

must be willing to show up honestly and authentically within ourselves and to not take responsibility for how others perceive and react to us. We must view grief and the vulnerability that stems from it as a gift, not a nuisance, because of the love and healing it can bring. I learned this at a young age, since when I was growing up, grief and celebrations were not divorced from each other. Funerals were recognized as “homegoing celebrations,” because we knew that it was just as important to celebrate a life as it was to mourn.

The first step is to allow ourselves to experience love of self, which is not the absence of grief, anger, or pain, but the unconditional acceptance of *all* emotions—even the undesirable passions that cause us shame. When we are able to look at our own grief, we develop a self-love that is grounded in compassion and empathy and that is fully honest. This compassion and empathy allows us, in turn, to envision the possibility of ourselves in others, and others in us. When we fully cultivate empathy for self and others, we leave less room for shame, which opens up the opportunity for us to be accountable without blame, to set and respect boundaries, and to experience power without grasping or holding on.

2

Embodied Trauma and Time

*If I had wings like a dove.
If I had wings like Noah's dove,
I'd fly away to Galilee.*

—SOUTH CAROLINA BLACK BAPTIST HYMN

Those who either endure severe trauma or live under oppressive conditions frequently feel that they are running out of time faster than the “average” person, and in many cases, their perception is accurate. Their awareness of how social structures manipulate their lives into fewer moments is a source of considerable grief. In his book *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle*, Haruki Murakami describes his experience of grief and trauma as a separation from community—he no longer sees himself as “one of them” because, he says, “They are up there, on the face of the earth; I am down here, in the bottom of a well. They possess the light, while I am in the process of losing it.... Down here there are no seasons. Not even time exists.”³

³Haruki Murakami, *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle* (New York: Vintage Books, 1998).

In Western cultures, we tend to think of time as an objective, continuous line that flows through the histories of all peoples and cultures and terminates in the present. However, even physicists assert that time is relative, and they're not alone. Time is a heavily subjective experience, shifting and changing based on the circumstances of one's culture and oneself. What we perceive as a single line from our perspective is just one thread in an interwoven mesh of human experience, and the markers that we use to identify “past,” “present,” and “future” overlap and sometimes contradict the threads and markers laid down by others. We perceive our line as a universal truth and ourselves as arbiters of what is patently obvious to us, and the result is often that we deny the validity of other threads. For example, American children are taught that Christopher Columbus “discovered” a land inhabited by people with histories that existed independent of Europeans—the implication being that, until Europeans arrived and noticed them, Indigenous peoples were outside of space and time.

Indeed, the West often looks back at the conquering of other nations and feels vindicated by time: martial victory becomes a stand-in for strength, and strength for faster progression into the “future,” shorthand as “technological advancement.” Thus every war becomes a test of who has advanced further in time and has the paternal responsibility of imposing their time on others, and every slaughter becomes a gift: we brought these people into their future, instead of letting them dillydally in the inferior past. The common response to criticism of imperialism by the descendants of conquered peoples is “Then go back to where you came from. Turn in your iPhones and wallow in the mud.”

The problem with this outlook is not just that the ends don’t justify the means; it’s the assumption that the ends are, in and of themselves, objectively valuable. As a result of imperialism and colonization, many Indigenous cultures were seized and stifled until they were flattened into nothing more than historical artifacts in museums or pages in history books, frozen alive as totems of The Past despite their continued, often struggling existence in the present.

I grew up in a small rural community where faith, hope, and possibility were more sincere than outcomes. When I left my childhood home in South Carolina to access better educational opportunities, I felt as if I had grown up in a place suspended in time and space, despite geographically being located in a “Western” nation. As I found myself in new institutions and cities attached to the elusive concepts of “modernity” and “progress,” I began to feel disintegrated, as if my own life were becoming unraveled from the space-time fabric: this world did not recognize the trappings of my life as “the present.”

Every culture has counted and interpreted time in its own way. According to the Smithsonian, the Mayan “calendar is not divided into months. Instead, it is made from a succession of 20 day glyphs in combination with the numbers 1 to 13, and produces 260 unique days.”⁴ All of the meaning that we imbue into our months—the moon, menstrual cycles, divisions between work and leisure—are replaceable by other cultures’ relevant signifiers. And it’s not only the delineations that vary: what must fit within them varies as well. In fifteenth-century England, the life expectancy was around thirty.⁵ The twenty-first-century English life expectancy has drastically altered the way that the average English person experiences and organizes their life around time: how long children can remain children, when and whether one can stop working, who is present in one’s life and for how long. What is work time in a culture that sprinkles rest and leisure throughout the day or for a person whose passion is their livelihood? What is supper time in a country where meals are cooked fresh and served slow

compared with places where meals are taken on the go? The values and assumptions of a culture are reflected as much in the way that culture approaches time as they are in the language(s) that culture speaks.

⁴ “The Calendar System,” Living Maya Time: Sun, Corn, and the Calendar, Smithsonian National Museum of the American Indian, <https://maya.nmai.si.edu/calendar/calendar-system>.

⁵ Wikipedia, s.v. “Life Expectancy,” last modified April 30, 2020, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Life_expectancy.

All we’re really trying to measure when we parse time into pieces and assign those pieces meaning is a lifetime—a thing that does have a start, middle, and end. A thing embodied.

Black folks often jokingly refer to “colored people time” to explain why people of color move slowly and are late by the standards of white people—or Western time, which is always ticking. We live in a society in which we attempt to manage and objectify time, manipulating it while claiming that it represents some objective truth. We read books on time management and try to think of ways to hoard time so that we can fit “more” into a life. Our perpetual obsession with time and its effects on our lives are relentless. We are nearly ruined by this phantom ticking, carried by the winds of death. And when there isn’t enough time, we attempt to steal it from elsewhere, from others. We steal time in the form of emotional energy and physical effort. We steal lives.

* * *

In a TED Talk entitled “The Racial Politics of Time,” author, Black feminist scholar, and professor Brittney Cooper investigates the history and conception of time.⁶ She explores the historical assumption that Black people, and African Americans in particular, do not have a history, as Hegel asserted when he said that Africa “has no historical part of the World.” The belief that Black people have made no significant impact on history has sustained white supremacy for centuries—witness the introduction of “Negro History Week” in 1926 and later the reduction of “Black History” to one month. Cooper also quotes Ta-Nehisi Coates, who argues that “the defining feature of being drafted into the Black race is the inescapable robbery of time.” Coates believes that we “experience time discrimination ... not just as structural, but as personal: in lost moments of joy, lost moments of connection, lost quality of time with loved ones and lost years

of healthy quality of life.”

⁶Brittney Cooper, “The Racial Politics of Time,” filmed October 2016, TED video, 12:22, www.ted.com/talks/brittney_cooper_the_racial_politics_of_time.

There is something about the experience of Blackness in America, particularly Black womanhood, that immediately propels us toward death while we labor our way back to life. Like many African American children, I experienced suicidal ideation at a young age. It took time to get used to life. It wasn’t until I was twenty-five years old that I knew what it was like to want to be alive. This trauma manifested itself in depression, anxiety, and alcoholism. In Alcoholics Anonymous we are taught that we are diseased—we will always be plagued by our addiction. Only by committing to a path of abstinence can we remain in remission, but we are never free. After a couple of years I came to understand that it was not my dependence that haunted me, but the perversion of unmet human needs that had gathered and festered like gangrenous wounds. I could not depend on the world, my loved ones, or my environment to keep me safe. My suffering left me spiritually destitute, bound to the hell realm of my own mind. These cravings were inherited across generations as my father, mother, and grandmother were all driven by an endless spiritual famine. For years I had attended AA meetings and watched people trade one addiction for another, using sugar, cigarettes, exercise, or coffee to satisfy a violent vacancy. I, myself, was starving for what the world could not give me. I was consumed by my own grief.

It is no secret that trauma, particularly childhood trauma and abuse, have long-term impact on a person’s health and life expectancy. Although grief and trauma are a part of every human’s experience, we know that people experience additional trauma according to their race, gender, sexual orientation, and other identities, in addition to the burden of generational trauma inherited across time.⁷ Furthermore, one’s identities and social location influence chances of being “at risk” of suffering from certain mental and/or physical ailments, including heart attack, hypertension, diabetes, schizophrenia, cancer, infant mortality, and maternal mortality, to say nothing of the elevated risks of encountering physical harm through sexual violence, police violence, and mental abuse.

⁷Darold Treffert, “Genetic Memory: How We Know Things We Never Learned,” Scientific American Blog Network, *Scientific American*, January 28, 2015, <https://blogs.scientificamerican.com/guest-blog/genetic-memory-how-we-know-things-we-never-learned>.

* * *

It was the first day of first grade. I was new to Trinity Christian School, and as the new kid, I was figuring out how to make friends. No one would've ever pegged me as shy; I was too young to have begun performing the self-consciousness and doubt that society expects of women at any age. So I walked up to Jenny Sebling and Annie Torrence and asked if I could join in playing ball. Annie didn't seem to mind.

“No! She can't play with us. She's Black.”

I didn't have a clear understanding of what it meant to be Black in Jenny's eyes. Perhaps it was just another way of saying “different.” Annie tossed me the ball, causing Jenny to leave in protest. From that day on, Jenny made it her mission to antagonize me at every opportunity. Soon I came to understand that being Black was not merely an observation of difference, but of being less-than. And *being* less-than came with the expectation of *having* less-than, which, when it didn't happen naturally, Jenny was willing to personally ensure. Whenever Jenny or someone from her clique was appointed classroom or hall monitor, they reported that I misbehaved even when I abided by the rules. The consequences of misbehaving in a teacher's absence was a five- to ten-minute time deduction from a sixty-minute recess. Over the course of my primary education, I consistently received between 8 and 25 percent less leisure time than my white classmates.

⁸Nia Decaille, “Biased Discipline Policies Put Black Girls on the School-to-Prison Pipeline.” *Vice*, August 16, 2017, www.vice.com/en_us/article/j55p58/biased-discipline-policies-put-black-girls-on-the-school-to-prison-pipeline.

This type of arbitrary punishment has a well-studied and life-alteringly detrimental effect on Black children. It has been dubbed the “school-to-prison pipeline” because the inconsistently applied and often escalating punishments force Black and Brown children into the permanent role of delinquent, often on the strength of a minor infraction or—in cases like mine—no infraction at all.⁸ Black and Brown inner-city youth are often called “at risk,” an agent-obscuring euphemism that labels children according to their circumstances, instead of naming those responsible for the environmental and socioeconomic factors that endanger their lives. Black girls are criminalized for wearing braided hairstyles in school, with some institutions going as far as banning Black hairstyles.⁹ Black girls are suspended and arrested at rates seven times higher than white girls and

punished for merely existing.¹⁰ Black children are twice as likely to attempt suicide than white children, in addition to being twice as likely to die during birth.¹¹ And, according to Black Women’s Blueprint, 40 to 60 percent of African American girls are sexually violated before the age of eighteen.¹²

⁹ Kayla Lattimore, “When Black Hair Violates the Dress Code,” *NPR*, July 17, 2017 www.npr.org/sections/ed/2017/07/17/534448313/when-black-hair-violates-the-dress-code.

¹⁰ Taryn Finley, “Black Girls Are 7 Times More Likely to Be Suspended Than White Girls: Report,” *HuffPost*, September 11, 2017, www.huffpost.com/entry/black-girls-7-times-more-likely-suspended_n_59b69232e4b0354e44134c6d.

¹¹ Joseph P. Williams, “Why Are Black Children Killing Themselves?” *U.S. News & World Report*, May 31, 2018 www.usnews.com/news/healthiest-communities/articles/2018-05-31/whats-behind-the-higher-suicide-rate-among-black-children.

¹² Brooke Axtell, “Black Women, Sexual Assault and the Art of Resistance,” *Forbes*, April 26, 2012, www.forbes.com/sites/shenegotiates/2012/04/25/black-women-sexual-assault-and-the-art-of-resistance/#2fc7a8fa7469.

Unlike Black children, white children often have time to be children. They are allowed to be raucous in a classroom, to experiment with illicit substances, and to make mistakes. White children, especially white boys, are presumed innocent until proven guilty. And even when they are found to be guilty of grievous harm, like Brock Turner, who was “just trying to hook up with a girl,” the world does its best to give them a chance at redemption.¹³

¹³ Will Garbe, “Brock Turner: ‘I Was Just Trying to Hook up with a Girl,’” *Dayton Daily News*, September 15, 2016, www.daytondailynews.com/news/local/brock-turner-was-just-trying-hook-with-girl/rp4khXYIMJRNKKo5yNeyPN.

“It was just an error in judgment.”

“He was just a kid.”

“It would be a shame to cut off such a promising career.”

Indeed, even full-grown white men can be given the leeway of children: Mark Zuckerberg and Elon Musk are routinely characterized by the American press as teenage geniuses, too whacky and brilliant to be bothered about things like privacy laws or SEC violations, despite being in their late thirties and forties, respectively.

White parents are often able to protect their children from the consequences of history such that their children do not have to bear the weight of their ancestors' mistakes. White children do not fear walking through stores with hands in their pockets; they do not fear playing with toy guns in parks, lest a white adult shoots them, mistaking them for a menace.¹⁴ But Black children do not have the luxury of childhood ignorance or missteps. The cost is too high. The first death that white parents are likely to talk to their children about is a family pet's or an elderly grandparent's. The first death Black parents talk to their children about is their children's own. Parents of marginalized children live intimately with the reality of embodied time. Time is not a given.

¹⁴Matthew Haag, "Cleveland Officer Who Killed Tamir Rice Is Hired by an Ohio Police Department," *New York Times*, October 8, 2018, www.nytimes.com/2018/10/08/us/timothy-loehmann-tamir-rice-shooting.html.

Shaping a child's identity in relation to an environment overwhelmingly categorized by death and deprivation limits the possibilities for that child. I personally cannot imagine what it must feel like to have an identity not crafted by statistics that tell me when or how I am most likely to die. During routine visits with white doctors, I am frequently reminded that high blood pressure and diabetes are risks associated with being of African descent. That my blood pressure is consistently 92/64 and my gut sensitivities preclude me from having a diet that is likely to result in diabetes does not spare me these annual scoldings. I grant that one's racial and ethnic background increases the likelihood of developing certain illnesses, so awareness, testing, and prevention are necessary. However, I notice that though African Americans have a higher likelihood of developing lupus and certain cancers, sans any symptoms of these diseases, I am not tested and reminded annually about them. Black women also experience higher rates of dysmenorrhea, yet a physician has never asked about how I manage my monthly pain. And though Black girls in the United States experience higher rates of sexual violence, I have never encountered a physician who takes a race-based, trauma-informed approach during gynecological exams. The difference between these other racially informed risks and high blood pressure or diabetes is that the latter risks are tinged with the assumption of moral failure, and associated with behaviors indicative of a self-indulgent and irresponsible lifestyle. The white doctors' reminders communicate not just that death will happen *to* me and I need to be vigilant about symptoms, but that they already know my death will be my *fault*, whether symptoms exist yet or not.

* * *

Throughout human existence, conquering cultures have sought to disappear other nations from time, thus erasing them from existence. Today, those of us who experience marginalization as a result of anti-Blackness within the United States feel that what has been done to us as a people constitutes the greatest injustice of all time. We believe that what has already happened and what continues to happen to us is unique. But humans have been struggling with the same dynamics since the beginning of our known history. There are entire cultures of people who have been wiped off the face of the earth, some of whom we don't even know existed. We have spent decades within the United States trying to figure out how to address the roots of racism by recognizing and deconstructing and reconstructing the identity of whiteness, and while this is an important step toward healing injustice, I believe that we are only scratching the surface. Our social location is merely a tool that we use to enact harmful dynamics; the roots of what drive people to act venomously is not unique. Almost every group of people that has walked this earth knows what it means to war, to rape, to colonize, to conquer. Until we address the root of what drives people across histories and time to repeat narratives of harm against others, we will continue to merely scratch the surface of spiritual healing.

We are all more than we are in this given moment, meaning that it took many people across various timelines and histories to make us. And yet we are less—because our experience of suffering doesn't encompass the end-all and be-all of the human condition. Neither does our recent memory. The beauty and cruelty of life is that it goes on against our deepest wishes and most profound fears. Until we address the root of the issue—grief and fear of loss—our anxiety will continue to manifest in damaging ways. Until we address our grief and fear of loss, we will continue to clamber on top of others, pushing them under the surface rather than working together to find ways to allow everyone to float.

3

Personhood

*My God don't speak like a natural man.
He speaks so sinners can understand.
My feet get tired, I can't walk.
My tongue gets tied, I can't talk.
My eyes get dim, I can't see.
Gonna step right out. Come and go with me....*

—SOUTH CAROLINA BLACK BAPTIST HYMN

Trauma, grief, and oppression don't just impact a person's perception of and access to time through physiological shortening. They also restrict access to self—which is to say, they generate massive amounts of grief while dulling the tools required for spiritual healing. Our own lived experiences are informed by our social identities—how people perceive and respond to us, both consciously and subconsciously. In *Sister Citizen*, Melissa Harris-Perry compares the experience of Black womanhood in America to standing up in a “crooked room” constructed to keep them off balance. “When they confront race and gender stereotypes, Black women are standing in a crooked room and they have to figure out which way is up.... It can be hard to stand up in a crooked room.”¹⁵ The type of spatial disorientation Harris-Perry describes is similar to the experience of pilots. Spatial orientation allows pilots to “to perceive motion and three-dimensional position in relation to the surrounding environment.” Without similar experiences of reality, there is limited potential for connection and shared experiences, depending on how crooked the room. In other words, there is limited capacity to have one's humanity and personhood recognized.

¹⁵ Melissa Victoria Harris-Perry, *Sister Citizen* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2011).

The topic of personhood has been extensively debated throughout Western philosophy, and there are many schools of thought on its characteristics. In his essay “Freedom of the Will and the Concept of a Person,” Harry Frankfurt differentiates between a human being and a person. He speculates that biology and species do not make someone a person; in fact, being a person is a more

profound experience than simply being human. The way that personhood is crafted in the West, in part based on his philosophy, means that not all humans are considered persons, and nonhumans can, under certain conditions, have access to personhood. A key indicator of personhood is the ability to recognize and interact with one's own inclinations, to develop free will and agency. In other words, a person is an agent who has the ability to identify with their desires in a way that translates into concrete action. A person is thus a being who has the *power* to engage their own will while deliberating about their motivations.¹⁶

¹⁶Harry G. Frankfurt, "Freedom of the Will and the Concept of a Person," *The Journal of Philosophy* 68, no. 1(1971): 5. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2024717>.

Developing personhood is a collective exercise. Our experience and understanding of ourselves is informed by how others view and respond to us. In her book, *Holding On and Letting Go*, Hilde Lindemann reflects on identity and personhood. According to Lindemann, the "human experience of identities has two elements: a sense of belonging and a sense of being separate."¹⁷ Communities play a crucial role in the early process of development by shaping a child's identity and sense of self. But as a child becomes an individual and develops agency, both the child and the community shift definitions of who they are in order to make space for both the individual and the collective to grow freely.

¹⁷Hilde Lindemann, *Holding and Letting Go: The Social Practice of Personal Identities* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 47.

Consent and negotiation are thus essential to identity formation. In other words, both identity and personhood are social and relational. Personhood requires recognition expressed through feelings, thoughts, desires, actions, and intentions. It involves the participation of others in the formation of self-identity, because others have to interact with the self we've constructed. To hold someone in personhood both respects and makes room for all the ways they are and will be. We must constantly work on how we choose to recognize another being because "personhood gives us ourselves and we can't be who we are without the other persons who initially hold us in personhood." In cases where recognition is impaired, such as the case with people who are not able to form a cohesive narrative of self, it is our responsibility to meet that individual where they are, it is our duty to hold each other in recognition throughout life. And so, misrecognition—the crooked room—causes damage to the personhood of others.

The relationship between the recognition of self and the recognition of others has been a topic of intense philosophical study. In the passage entitled “Lordship and Bondage” in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, better known as the Master-Slave Dialectic, Hegel explores the importance of self-recognition.¹⁸ According to Hegel, the notion of *self* is shaped primarily by recognizing the distinction from the *other*. The other is always necessary to mediate self such that self-consciousness can develop. Hegel argues that the actualization of self is dependent upon “the destruction and death of the other.”

¹⁸Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Spirit (The Phenomenology of Mind)*, trans. James Black Baillie (New York: Digireads.com, 2009).

Because of this, the self is always under threat of coming under siege by the other, and so it seeks to consume the other so that it may be unhindered. According to Hegel, the process of developing self-consciousness—or self-identity—is a process of domination. One identity can only come to realize itself through the destruction of the other. The paradox of this is that—although consciousness seeks to destroy the other—by definition, it can only exist in contrast to the other. The self is “socially shaped by the very practices in which it participates, and because selves change over time, the stories that once represented them—if they are to represent them accurately—must fall out of the narrative tissue, to be replaced by newer stories that capture what is important about the self as it is now.”¹⁹

¹⁹Lindemann, *Holding and Letting Go*, 16.

This understanding of personhood and self-recognition provides a powerful framework for understanding the way our identities inform our access to time, resources, and even to ourselves. White personhood, male personhood, heterosexual personhood, and so forth are intelligible only through the negation of the personhood of their counterparts; but as those counterparts’ personhood has been asserted and (in theory) socially accepted over time, the original negation has not comported with the self-conception of people with social power, and it has therefore “fallen out of their narrative tissue,” though the reality of that negation continues to be experienced by marginalized people every day. In other words, once exhibiting homophobia is no longer compatible with the popular notion of “being a good person,” the reality of homophobia as more than an abstract concept—the reality of homophobia in any of its myriad tangible, specific acts—must be denied in order to preserve the “goodness” of an

accidental discriminator. And because the everyday realities of the marginalized do not reflect this updated self-narrative of the privileged (“I was just joking—that’s not homophobia”), their realities are often denied, further reinforcing their sense of misrecognition even while those with social power insist that it is, in fact, their own personhood that is misrecognized (“How dare you suggest that I’m homophobic?”). Like the life of Schrödinger’s cat, these elusive acts of injustice are acknowledged as possible in theory, but always unknowable in practice. Rather than attempting to reduce the occurrence of words or actions that reject or harm the personhood of others, we deny the possibility of harm given the lack of discriminatory bones in people’s bodies or the inscrutable feelings of their hearts.

In this way, the self-recognition of those with social power is prioritized in the original creation of their power and personhood and is then continuously reprioritized over time, at the expense of others.

* * *

Humans have grappled with power and mystery for many centuries. Even in various mythologies, humans have been viscerally aware of our own impermanence and fallibility. For example, in Greek mythology there were the Titans, an early generation of gods who were the children of Gaia (“mother earth”) and Uranus (the sky). Cronus, one of the Titans, was king of the gods, but he received a prophecy that one day he would be overthrown by one of his children. In order to save himself, Cronus attempted to stifle the threat posed by a future generation by eating all of his children. As a god, one might imagine that he had enjoyed a long life, as close to immortality as any of us can imagine. And yet he was still willing to destroy others in order to both hold on to power and have more access to time. Ultimately, his wife, Rhea, hid her youngest child away safely and then wrapped a stone in swaddling clothes and tricked Cronus into swallowing it, thinking it was a baby. That last-born child was Zeus, and when he came of age, he overthrew his father and freed his siblings, who had been swallowed whole but—being gods—were still alive.

Each generation of supernatural beings was stronger than the last. Since Zeus and his siblings—the Olympian gods—succeeded the Titans, they were imagined to be stronger. Cronus came to power by castrating his own father, Uranus, and Zeus overthrew his father, Cronus.

The Titan Prometheus is lauded as the champion of humanity, having both created humankind from clay and stealing fire from the sun, against Zeus's wishes, in order to give us heat and light. Fire is a vital source of energy, both physically and metaphysically, as it represents hope, power, and strength. Without it, we would be unable to see at night, to stay warm in the winter, to eat cooked food, or to protect ourselves with forged weapons. Fire is the foundation of almost every human technological advancement, from the use of heat to forge tools to harnessing electricity. Without it, we wouldn't have a fighting chance. It was ultimately our access to fire that allowed humans to overthrow the gods. We began reading, which allowed us to demystify the power of myths. We discovered science and laid the foundation for disbelief and disenchantment. All of this was made possible by having access to a power source reserved for the gods and stolen by someone with less power, but great proximity.

These myths are profound reflections of our deepest anxieties and fears, that those closest to us also have the power to destroy us. And yet we need them. We require the presence of external entities in order to define who we are, but those entities are inherently a threat to us. And so we concoct social structures, philosophies, practices, and definitions that distance us from potential threats and give us greater access to life, freedom, agency, and the future.

People are constantly moving the boundary of what's close to them and what isn't. Children are our ties to the future, which we are always trying to manipulate and control. Like time, children have a knack for escaping us, always trying to outwit their parents, asserting their own will to influence the world around them. People frequently have children with hopes that through their offspring they are able to live forever (or at least longer), but the irony is that while we instill hopes and visions of the future into a child, good parenting accepts that through their own will, children will necessarily make their parents, and their vision, antiquated. Otherwise, nothing would advance. On the surface, having children perpetuates the continuation of our lineage, but the truth is that progress, or change in any form, requires some form of death or loss—death of our vision, loss of an imagined future, loss of power, and loss of self. Though most of us can't fathom literally killing our own children, many of us subconsciously respond to threats against our life with some level of violence.

Ultimately, we are aware that our time and power are limited, as was the case with Uranus and Cronus. And the reality of proximity and the increased risks it poses to us in terms of death and loss are real. The paradox is that we need proximity in order to establish influence over the future, and yet proximity poses

the greatest risk of destruction. Negation of personhood controls the threat of proximity by creating distance, justifying the limitation and denial of access to power, freedom, and time.

Black Women's History in America

Marginalized communities are frequently denied access to personhood, which restricts their access to freedom and power and means that they are not able to move through life as freely. If those with social privilege in a given situation are able to use access to personhood in order to theoretically distance themselves from the people whose power they ultimately fear, they have a foundation to create distance socially and physically.

In college, I began to take an interest in personhood and identity construction beginning with the earliest—and for many of us, the only—knowledge we have of ourselves as Black men and women within the United States: our bondage. But I am a woman in a community that defines Blackness by the experiences of cis Black men and often legitimizes those experiences to the exclusion of Black women and disabled, LGBTQ+, and gender-nonconforming Black folks. Dominance is often shaped by what it isn't, so in a society in which dominance is synonymous with whiteness and masculinity, Black female bodies are often used as the ruler against which everyone else measures their superiority—and with which Black women track their failure to measure up.

The construction of womanhood establishes all women as rapable objects in need of male protection, which makes the role and definition of womanhood in direct opposition to personhood. Defining the female body by the ease with which it can be violated makes the construction of womanhood a deconstruction of her humanity, with rape itself as the dehumanizing action used to annihilate its victim. Men, too, have an orifice that allows for sexual violation, yet the capacity to be violated is not the defining feature of masculine identity.²⁰ Thus, though the ability to be raped is often viewed from a biological perspective, both the action and function of rape are social.

²⁰ Susan Brownmiller, *Against Our Will: Men, Women and Rape* (New York: Fawcett, 2010).

Similarly, while every woman is equally vulnerable to the threat of sexual violation, certain social factors—specifically identity construction—make some women more susceptible than others. Within a patriarchal framework, part of what defines a woman is her vulnerability, which is often exhibited by economic

and physical reliance upon men. However, being a woman does not automatically imply that one's body warrants protection: only *ladies*, women who conform to patriarchal expectations, women who are “refined, polite, well-spoken, of high social position and economic class” are worthy of protection.²¹ Being a “lady” relies heavily on Western constructs of fragile femininity—constructs that deliberately leave Black women in some nebulous category between man and woman, with bodies that neither need nor are worthy of protection.

²¹Merriam-Webster, s.v. “lady,” <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/lady>.

As a result of institutionalized barriers, historically and presently, Black women have been categorically denied access to ladyship. The public representation of white women, often clothed with many layers and adorned with accessories—compared to enslaved Black women, who were often given rags for clothing—was often used to perpetuate preexisting notions of Black women's immorality. Black women have been enslaved and/or have worked as domestic servants in white households, cleaning homes and watching white children, while leaving their own offspring unattended in order to provide for their own families; Black women have worked in factories and fields, forced to leave their homes for the sake of survival; Black women have had to develop lives, voices, and wills of our own in order to survive with or without male “protection.” Within a social context in which women *need* protection, the sexual and physical labor performed by Black women within a white patriarchal context is contrary to the definitions of both womanhood and ladyship. In order to “earn” protection, a woman must not “put” herself in danger by either behaving contrary to gender roles or simply being in the way of men. A woman whose behavior deviates from patriarchal expectations is responsible for unwanted violations directed against her body. And so Black women have been strategic targets of violence, specifically sexual violence, and both Black and white men have used their violence against us to reify our supposed inherent lack of worth. Black women can be assaulted because they aren't ladies; Black women aren't ladies because they can be assaulted.

Identities come into existence by linking abstract representation—often reinforced by social, political, and economic instruments—to physical bodies, creating a link between anatomy, identity, and authority.²² If Black women have been bound by images of depravity, sexual immorality, and dissolution, then white women have been enslaved by their responsibility to uphold constructs of

morality and purity. White women were expected to exhibit qualities of virtue and piety. White men were obsessed with the purity of white women, describing their character as “delicate ... spotless ... polished as alabaster, fragile as porcelain—but above all, pure as the driven snow (with its inherent connotations of coldness).”²² The stereotype of white women’s frigidity versus Black women’s hot nature is demonstrated in the film *Birth of a Nation*, in which the mulatto woman, also called the “plague of the nation,” seduces her white master. In the same film, when a white woman encounters the relentless sexual pursuit of a Black male, she would rather throw herself off of a cliff—which she, in fact, does—than blemish her character via sexual immorality. In a society where “elite males” use women as “living proof of their wealth and status; testimonies of their worth,” the exalted purity of white womanhood was crucial for the redemption of white civility in light of the atrocities of slavery. A high and unrealistic standard for the performance of white womanhood was necessary in order for white men to justify their place and their actions.

²²Gail Bederman, *Manliness and Civilization: A Cultural History of Gender and Race in the United States, 1880–1917* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000).

²³Catherine Clinton, *The Plantation Mistress: Another Side of Southern Slavery* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1982).

The paradox is that even if we create distance between ourselves and those we subjugate, we need the very beings that we objectify in order to recognize ourselves and become real, in the same way that any god—of Greek mythology or biblical literature—needs our belief and commitment in order to be actualized. The ability of white men to have unfettered power depends upon the restriction of women’s freedom: the relegation of women to roles of caring and cleaning and child-rearing and generally maintaining the trappings of men’s lifestyles so they needn’t personally sacrifice their own time. This is something that patriarchy trains all men to aspire toward, although in America only some are able to succeed—to be able to have friendships, affairs, pursue existential meaning through careers and hobbies, and have leisure because someone else bears the consequences of their freedom.

If whiteness is both the socially constructed antithesis of Blackness and the epitome of human evolution, then Blackness is degeneracy—Blackness is neither civilized nor advanced. The purported inferiority of the Black race was used to support the enslavement and subordination of African Americans within a white supremacist establishment. Linking Blackness to degeneracy allowed

white men to argue that the guidance of a patriarch was needed to protect and aid the Negro against herself.

Similarly, if masculinity is defined by the ability to simultaneously protect, control, and dominate women, then slavery relied on a gendered narrative of race that likened the inferiority of *all* enslaved African Americans to the inferiority of women. In short, it stripped Black men of their masculine privilege by linking their inferiority to the corruption of women, a categorical degeneracy from which African American women could neither by race nor gender be redeemed.²⁴ Indeed, the same language used to enslave Negroes was used to confine white women to a fate of domesticity and subservience to white men since both women and Negroes (i.e., enslaved African Americans) were “weak, passive and irresponsible.”²⁵ Therefore, if both women and enslaved African Americans possess attributes that justify their enslavement, then only white men were granted the “right” of freedom.

²⁴ Deborah G. White, *Ar'n't I a Woman? Female Slaves in the Plantation South* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1979).

²⁵ White, *Ar'n't I a Woman?*, 29.

One of the primary enactments of white supremacy is the white male's protection of “his own” women from sexual assault across racial lines while perpetrating acts of sexual violence against all women, especially Black women. And since the ability to protect “one's own” women from sexual assault is an important part of the construction of male identity, the assault of Black women is often interpreted not in relation to the women themselves, but in relation to the social, physical, and political power of Black men. The attack against a Black female body is viewed as an attack against Black masculinity, and thus “the Black community,” since a Black female body is viewed as a Black man's property to defend—or destroy. During the Black power movement, Black women were used as political war zones to express male power and privilege. It was assumed that by giving Black men the patriarchal dominance assigned to white men, including dominance over women, *all* Black people would gain liberation. However, as bell hooks states, female bodies have never gained liberty through greater male power. Chastity is one of the primary ways in which a woman's value is assessed, so if a woman loses her chastity via force, then the man responsible for taking sexual advantage of her also takes her worth. The acquisition of and dominance over female bodies is required to build masculine

worth, and so women in Black communities—communities where a man’s dignity is stripped via racism yet redeemed through his masculine identity—are at higher risk of experiencing sexual violence from men of all races.

In this way, Black girlhood and Black womanhood are essentially defined by the violence and atrocities others are able to commit against our personhood in order to amplify their own sense of self-worth. In order for white women’s bodies to remain the private property of white men, Black women’s bodies must be public sources of display, use, and discourse.²⁶ This laid the foundation for the present-day phenomenon of Black women’s bodies as objects for public consumption, from nonconsensual touching of our hair to discussion of our breeding patterns and fertility to simultaneous denigration and appropriation of our social trends. Black women have been made available in every way so that white women can be kept out of reach, which means that white women—as many restrictions as they have faced on their own liberty—have been able to avoid the full magnitude of both Black and white male degeneracy: Black women’s marginalization keeps white women closer to safety in the fight for liberation. Black women are not real people with a present and a future. The bodies that we occupy now are shells of a shattered being, meant only to pave the way for white America’s tomorrow.

²⁶White, *Ar’n’t I a Woman?*, 30.

Black Women’s Anger

I once officiated a wedding in which two white drag queens suddenly appeared in spray tan, one wearing a wig of braids and the other an afro, performing what they imagined to be Black womanhood as the epitome of female strength. They projected a “carefree” persona by embracing their sexuality and boldness in the face of an almost all white and somewhat conservative crowd of onlookers, reveling in the audience’s gasps and complete shock as they regaled us with Blaccents and “urban” word choices, twerked, and flipped their wigs in the name of “empowerment.”

The thing I appreciate about drag in theory is that it is a commentary on gender as a performance. However, I have found that in practice, many gay men treat the art form less as a commentary on the patently ridiculous and impossible standards of masculinity and femininity and more as a costume into which they can briefly escape, acting out what is taboo even for women and leaving both it

and its consequences on the dressing room floor. What is presented and often interpreted as an affinity for womanhood is almost always mixed with a patriarchal disdain for women themselves. And it is almost always steeped fully in misogynoir, especially among white gay men like those I watched in disbelief at the wedding. The performance I was witnessing suggested that they felt truly radical, dressed and behaving in a manner and in a place where they were ultimately not wanted. But did they realize that a part of what made them feel radical and unwanted was that they were daring to exist in color?

I was so angry watching this performance, but it wasn't as simple as watching a form of Blackface. I was angry in a way that captured so much of what Black women have to be angry about, and why we must grieve. White people, especially those socialized as men, grew up with all of the privileges that whiteness and manhood afford, privileges that entitle them to embody the identity of individuals whose bodies continue to be policed to the point that we must actively fight to call them our own. *This* was the epitome of privilege. Here they were in afros and braids, in a world where Black women cannot wear these styles to school or work, in a world where some Black women aspire to have lighter skin and straighter hair because they feel so far removed from the privilege to shape and define themselves as beautiful, as desirable, as worthy—so far removed from themselves because of white supremacy and sexism that they die alive in their own skin, paralyzed by the will of others. No matter what they choose, whether it be their own bodies or the fragmented reflection of an “American Dream” with straight hair and light eyes, the mask will never fit. But these drag queens, and so many other white wearers of Blackness—Iggy Azalea, Miley Cyrus, Katy Perry, Ondria Harden, and a million Instagram influencers—appropriate the being and aesthetics of Black womanhood, marketing the very hairstyles, speech, and expressions that get us kicked out of schools, denied jobs, labeled “undesirable,” and over-policed as “new,” “fashionable,” and “bold.” What does it mean when Black women are not even given the power to fully experience themselves as their own source of joy, while others get to be empowered Black women?

* * *

I believe that Black women are inherently philosophers, because we are constantly plagued by existential awareness, along with unabating reminders of what can and will be taken from us, physically and spiritually. White supremacy

and the various systems that intersect with it turn others' grief and fear of dying into a weapon that pushes our bodies closer to the precipice of death in order to access a greater share of freedom and time. Even though people today have moved beyond speaking about racial differences in terms of physiological degeneracy, the language of moral degeneracy and the legacy of racist and sexist social structures continues to impact Black women's relationships with themselves and others and, therefore, their ability to manage or even recognize their own grief on a daily basis.

One of the primary ways that Black women are misrecognized and begin to misrecognize ourselves, is the constant messaging that we are threatening and angry. The one-dimensional caricature of the Angry Black Woman is often used to silence us into submission, mischaracterizing anything from insufficient positivity to passive neutrality to mild frustration as extreme anger and overreaction. The Angry Black Woman label is one that many of us avoid at all costs out of shame, and many Black women feel implicitly forced to participate in our own dehumanization by not accepting or acknowledging our feelings for fear of causing others discomfort. This makes it difficult to process any negative emotions, most especially anger itself, a natural emotion when faced with physical harm, injustice, and daily threats of emotional violence and exploitation. The peril of other people's perception of us is crucial because it not only dictates whether or not we are believed when we are harmed but also whether or not we will receive help in such cases—even from each other. Angry Black Women are viewed as more capable of withstanding pain, more capable of defending ourselves even against the most vile actions, despite functioning in a system not meant to protect us. Furthermore, whether or not we're dubbed "angry" influences our access to healthy romantic, coworking, and other relationships. No one wants to be around the Angry Black Woman. No one wants to witness our grief. Not even us.

* * *

In 1979, Elisabeth Kübler-Ross proposed that grief moves in stages, with anger being the second stage. I believe that grief is much more fluid and complex than her theory describes, but she was onto something in recognizing and naming the key emotions that people move through when grieving, including, but not limited to, denial, anger, bargaining, acceptance, and depression. So let's start calling anger what it is—a form of grief. When people

fear Black women's anger, what they are really afraid of is the depth of our bereavement. They are afraid of feeling powerless when faced with the depths of our pain, especially when they are implicitly implicated. The acuity of our grief is a reminder to a society that has normalized terror against us that we are real. We are human. And by letting ourselves experience the expression of grief in the form of anger, people around us are called to do something about it.

But they don't know what to do, and so they look to us for a map back to innocence. As a result of their feelings of powerlessness, the onus is reflected back to us to do something—to be friendlier, to react differently, to teach lessons, to pardon mistakes, to clean it up. They blame their discomfort on our suffering and not the systems that created it, because those systems are the foundation of their lives. In most cases, the expectation is that Black women bear the grief of everyone around us in addition to our own wounds so that people who require our proximity in order to be more powerful, more fulfilled, and more secure receive the benefits of our suffering without having to suffer or even truly witness its consequences. The same well-educated white people who quote Dylan Thomas's "Do not go gentle into that good night" and who empathize with the passion, resilience, and resistance of American revolutionaries or suffragettes argue against "radicalism," riots, anger, and discontent expressed by Black women. To them, injustice is an academic debate, not a complex and potentially fatal reality; it must be approached with the pretense of an impossible objectivity, not with the messy knowledge born of a collective lived experience.

The role of Black women in US history has been one of providing comfort and protection, acting as a barrier against those we are forced to serve and their grief, even when we are unable to be a barrier between ourselves or our loved ones and the reality of loss and death. After all, Black women were used as surrogates to perpetuate a slave-state in which our own children would not know freedom, in a country where our own bodies were both a site of healing and sustenance, of trauma and pain, as we simultaneously raised and breastfed future slave masters and slaves. We have always had to be on the front lines, our bodies and spirits assuming the greatest assaults against our humanity so that others might begin to dream of freedom. Many wounds have been inflicted, yet we have taken the paradox of our existence and created art, passion, beauty, and strength. Our Blackness and femininity are a source of power that remind others of death, so they seek to pervert and control us, directing all of their rage against our bodies while using us as a shield from their own mortality. They try to bury their fear, hate, and frustration inside of us until we are too heavy to carry our

own. Then, when we reflect back to them what their system has created, they seek to destroy us.

There are a lot of ways in which Black women's surrogacy is continuously perpetuated in our culture, not the least of which is being responsible for the lives of beings that we never consented to carry, as if they were our own. Somehow we become responsible for people's projections and expectations of us even when it is contrary to who we are and our own being. We are responsible for the rage of white people who can't stomach our freedom and autonomy, for the disdain of Black men who find that they can neither redeem themselves on our bodies nor between our legs. More importantly, we become responsible for what they choose to do with that rage. Privilege is power without responsibility. So if they assault us, maim us, degrade us, or violate us, we are at fault.

I once wrote an article about how saying "I'm sorry" rarely leads to lasting change if the person expressing sorrow doesn't actually feel remorse. The article specifically focused on men who committed acts of sexual violence and apologized but then continued perpetuating abusive and harmful actions. After the article was published, I received an email from an angry white man telling me that I was being biased because women are sometimes violent too, so I should write more about how we can all be better to each other as opposed to making men look "bad." If a heart surgeon writes an article about the dangers of a fast food diet on the heart, he is not likely to receive a message from a reader about how fast food also increases risk of cancer, so he should focus on how fast food is categorically bad for health. Why? Because writing about the impact of diet on the heart does not negate the impact of diet on other aspects of our health. Similarly, writing about men who commit sexual violence against women does not condone violence against men. Ultimately, this reader was either unwilling or unable to sit with his emotions about what I had written. As a result, he attempted to hold me responsible for what he was feeling by lashing out via email as opposed to reflecting on himself.

Frequently, Black women are required to create a mirage for the people around us, like a character playing simultaneous roles in different plots so that others don't feel threatened. Our safety and emotional peace depend on their comfort. As a result, white people get to feel like good citizens, and Black men get to reap the benefit of their masculine authority within relationship to us. It is like being in a video game in which we as Black women are the only characters who know we aren't real. And while everyone around us needs to feel in control of their environment, we are frantically pushing buttons on a controller in order

to keep up with the process. Not only are we placed with the blame of other people's personal experiences, we are "responsible" for what they think of us—from being hypersexualized to being objectified and dehumanized. We are "responsible" for other people's decision to ostracize us when we break character and express humanity via anger, pain, and fear in the face of our own degradation. We are "responsible" for the discomfort of white men and women when our Blackness is expressed untamed. We are "responsible" for the feelings of white people and men when our presence doesn't coddle their ego. And when we forgo that blame, we bear consequences. We risk losing the job we need to pay our rent and support our families because we dared to speak up after our personhood has taken too many assaults. Part of how white people perpetuate blame is by ghosting when things get difficult. They drop the ball because they don't have to carry it, they don't question whose court the ball is left in, because it's not their problem.

In a world that tries to make Black women responsible for other people's projections and reactions, it is exceedingly important that Black women remind each other of ourselves. We are the creators and energy behind mass movements, from Black Lives Matter to abolition. We are the ones who shape culture and art, the power that people wish they could embody with their "yass sis," spray tans, finger snaps, and "girl, bye." We are both the spirit behind expressions of "female empowerment" and the standard of femininity being co-opted in every LGBTQ+ movement. We are the raw source of power and strength.

Whether it's the way that we shimmy, shake our ass, wear our nails, flip our braids, joke crassly, laugh and talk loudly; the way we use our intellect, forcing violent narratives that were meant to erase us to identify our power as their source of discomfort; the way we get our degrees while also getting it how we live; or the way we challenge white folks and men who would rather build an empire on our bones than honor the body, life, and strength that is rightfully ours, we must remind ourselves of who we are.

Where Do We Go?

I believe that whiteness classes are a good step in helping people begin to uncover their patterns. However, I do not believe that these classes are able to ultimately address the root of white supremacy. Yes, it is absolutely necessary to understand the construction of whiteness and the function of white privilege, just as it is necessary to understand the root of sexism and patriarchy, homophobia, and so on. However, the step of unraveling the root cause of systemic trauma

does not involve holding people hostage by manipulating their social vulnerability. It requires looking internally and attending to one's own grief. We all possess the tools to be aware, to be mindful. These classes only begin to scratch the surface of whiteness, as they do not address the depths of what causes humans to misuse power across time—they do not engage the inherent grief and fear of death that inspires one person to take life from another in order to extend their own.

Whiteness isn't just about the color of one's skin, it is the result of structures that produce white privilege. When I reference grief in relation to whiteness, I am not imploring the reader to have pity or misplaced sympathy for white people, which typically come at the cost of the oppressed. I am advocating for a thorough understanding of what drives humans to use their social location to inflict harm, suppress, and oppress others so that we may address the root cause of suffering. I am further advocating for the use of mindfulness as a tool to sit in painful and deep awareness of our own fears, regardless of who we are, so as to not use our social location to subconsciously inflict pain onto others.

Enslaving African Americans for five hundred years while white Americans developed medical, economic, and technological advances using our bodies and labor made it such that white children have a greater shot at survival in an increasingly competitive world. It's like running a relay race in which white people have been able to pass the baton to the next generation for centuries. White women, though objectified and limited in their access to personhood, have experienced and passed on whatever protection they could derive from white men to their children and have played their part in the race for survival. Black people started the race running in place, restrained by elastic resistance bands that would give the illusion of progress for a few feet before snapping backward again. Finally, after watching white people get a five-hundred-year head start, Black people have been able to break down the initial barrier and get a stake in the race. And so we run, trying to catch up, overcompensating for the unfamiliar terrain, stiff joints, and the pain and setbacks from the inability to afford proper running shoes, all while dodging stones thrown deliberately in our way. Still, we keep running. We cannot stop and rest, because if we do, the baton will never make it to our children, and they will be knocked back to the beginning of the track. One would think that white people have created enough cumulative distance in order to not feel the imminent threat of competing fairly or equally for the limited resource of time, but there is always some hurdle—brand new or dragged from the past and repainted—that Black runners must jump to prove themselves equally worthy runners.

Many of us have sought refuge from this race in the Church, but since Black Americans' relationship with a higher power was, in many cases, fostered through a racist and oppressive Christian narrative, we have often inadvertently conflated models of hope, liberation, and oppression. The impact of this is compounded by every additional marginalized identity that an African American has projected onto them: whenever violence is committed against a community, women, LGBTQ+, and disabled people within that community often suffer extensively under a layered model of oppression, and Christianity makes a saint of those who suffer with grace.

For quite some time, I felt that the only way to liberate African Americans from the layers of violence and injustice committed toward and against us was to steer away from the Church. However, this was an oversimplification and a misunderstanding of the role that theology plays in healing human suffering. When white men tried to erase our history and crush our spirit, we buried our stories and hope where no man could destroy them—our faith in God. Black Christianity/Christianities continue to be places of refuge from many of the wrongs inflicted on our communities, even if we use the same narratives to inflict wrongs on some of our own people.

Even though I have not always participated actively in my Baptist tradition, I am culturally Baptist, informed by my history. Many mornings, I listen to recordings of my grandmother and great-great-great-aunts singing hymns on my way to work. Their power has grounded me in violent spaces that have sought to disempower me. Today I practice Buddhism, but I did not turn to Buddhism as a means to escape my Baptist faith. I came to expand it. Rather than replacing Christian theology, Buddhism has helped me further develop my definition and experience of God by teaching me to sit in the fullness of my own humanity, which is often rejected or denied in so many spaces. It has allowed me to see myself so that I might see others, and it gave me the tools to heal and return to the scene of my spiritual deaths: my family of origin, my faith tradition, and the primarily white spaces I have no choice but to occupy for education and access.

I no longer wish to attempt to divorce myself or other African Americans from our past, but rather make peace with it by finding ways to hold on to our heritage while allowing us to construct our identities outside of oppressive narratives. It is time for us to build paths of healing, growth, and forgiveness, devoid of hierarchies built on the backs of our differences. But intra-community forgiveness and healing can't take place in a context where individuals are either too afraid to face their own social power or would rather hide from their own

shame. And although in some ways the ball is in our court, we are not in this field alone: inter-community forgiveness and healing operate under the same principles and require the same introspection and courage of those with social power.

Systems of inequality perpetuate layers of violence, trauma, and grief, which, in turn, ultimately perpetuate fragmented relationships with self and others. We are in need of practices that offer guidance and the potential for healing. Forgiveness as a matter of reconciliation—between one individual and another, between communities and society—requires people to develop the courage to sit with their own grief honestly, fully, and without judgment in order to recognize and empathize with others. We must commit to inhabiting a “shared reality” where people who have been historically erased and maltreated are able to inherit conditions that facilitate healing.²⁷ Healing is possible when realities that have been misrepresented are replaced with more accurate narratives and receive proper recognition. That is, these narrative updates must not occur purely to restore the self-recognition, the innate personhood, of those with social power: people in all social locations must inhabit a *shared* reality and be accountable for their role in that reality, such that the personhood of one individual is not reliant on the negation of another. We therefore must develop models of spiritual healing that do not prioritize the personhood of the privileged or steal time from the marginalized.

²⁷For her discussion of “shared reality,” see Lindemann, *Holding and Letting Go*, 104.

How can we as a nation build sustainable relationships that recognize the continuous spiritual death inflicted by systems of inequity? How can we cultivate a way of being that isn’t an escape hatch from the reality of our participation in these systems? Above all, how do we heal the trauma created by systemic oppression so that we create new stories of self in relation to others?

It starts with healing our own spirit, not to the exclusion of others, but for the purpose of allowing room for all to thrive.

PART 2

Spiritual Healing

4

Coming into Alignment

*I heard the voice of Jesus say I long to be at rest ...
I came to Jesus as I was, weary, worn and sad.
I found in Him a resting place
and He has made me glad.*

—SOUTH CAROLINA BLACK BAPTIST HYMN

Mindfulness and Meditation: What It Is and What It Isn't

Any theology I engage must hold to the experiences I encounter as a chaplain; it must hold to the test of the unbearable, the unforgivable, the unimaginable. My favorite theologian, Paul Tillich, defines theology as that which “deals with what concerns us inescapably, ultimately, unconditionally.”²⁸ His theology of harmony between finite beings, or humans, with God’s infinity, which he describes as “the Ground of being,” is a philosophy of existential reconciliation.

²⁸ Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012), 10.

Tillich’s theology discusses estrangement, the state of distance and disunity. We are estranged from ourselves and from each other, and above all, we are estranged from God, the “Ground of our being” and “the origin and aim of our life.” Tillich does not identify God in the traditional Christian sense. God is not a being, but rather a concept—the “power of being” recognized as the foundational source of life itself. God is an essence—They are “the power inherent in everything.”²⁹ Some recognize this infinite power source as unconditional love. Some experience it through faith. Many only perceive the absence of this power amid our own suffering, in the poverty of healing and wholeness. Buddhist theology defines life as suffering and desire as one of the primary causes of suffering. Yet we desire only that which we don’t have—things that seem unattainable and distant. Desire does not exist where there is

unity and wholeness. This awareness that we are not whole, and our subsequent consumption by life's anxieties—not just DSM-5 generalized anxiety, but a deep existential fear and yearning, like grief—is the condition of estrangement.

²⁹Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, 236.

Tillich characterizes the things that keep us up at night as our “ultimate concern.” These are the thoughts and feelings that consume us, like life and death. Consequently, Tillich calls for a way of being that can address our deepest anguish. Frequently, our trauma creates the recipe for our ultimate concern, which means that trauma creates the potential for spirituality to be experienced and witnessed. In this sense, anger, sadness, and all other seemingly negative emotions are not inherently toxic or damaging. Instead, all emotions are a source of energy, and like energy, they can be neither created nor destroyed. They are merely present and can themselves either create or destroy. So we must use the tools available to us to transform our own suffering and the suffering of others into sites of spiritual healing.

Any theology that attempts neither to address that which concerns us ultimately nor to offer paths of reconciliation in the face of suffering and estrangement is inadequate. To walk strongly in one's faith requires the courage to hold one's theology to the test of estranged existence. I've searched tirelessly for a theology and practice that adequately addresses forgiveness and justice in the face of the unforgivable and unjust, that addresses the urgency of healing and reconciliation, specifically for bodies on the margins—bodies that continue to lie in the wake of centuries of unhealed, complex trauma. The skillsets that I've gained by working as a birth doula and a chaplain over the past four years are not separate. Every day, we witness and experience birth and death in a variety of contexts. We experience the loss of our parents on multiple levels, from witnessing the disappointment in their shortcomings to simply watching old age transform them into people we barely recognize—and from that loss, new insights and possibilities emerge. With each moment, the person who we are is dying to make room for the person we are becoming.

* * *

I frequently fall asleep watching documentaries. One night I fell asleep watching a documentary about supernovas and the Big Bang. I was captivated

by how one event—a collision—began a series of expansions that led to creation. I began thinking of God not as a person or a being, but as an event or a series of events, from the creation of the universe to the creation of intimacy between beings. I don't think of God as an omnipotent, omnipresent, omniscient being in the sky. I've come to recognize God as the source of power and energy, as possibility itself. God is both the driving force *and* the result of beings colliding. God has always been creating, since the beginning, through destruction. They are the energy that flows in all directions. God is present in moments of hopelessness because hope is born only through the birth and destruction of absolute despair.

Christian theologies place a lot of emphasis on resurrection and boundlessness in contrast to the Buddhist philosophy of impermanence. In these Christian theologies, God is omniscient, omnipotent, omnipresent: They are without bounds. The idea of a benevolent God without bounds in the midst of a world with so much suffering and absence is, to me, incomprehensible. I do believe in God as the source of all being and possibility, but I do not believe that They are limitless. All power and forms of energy have limits and boundaries. In my theology, God does not have infinite *breadth*, but infinite *depth*: that is, they are possibility itself and have infinite power and presence within the bounds of the possible. For example, there are infinite numbers between 1 and 2, but they are not boundless—the bounds are set by the integers 1 and 2.

Throughout my meditation practice, I've experienced the difference between infinite breadth and infinite depth. When I am able to accept the impermanence of things and the reality of imperfections in myself and others, I have access to emotions of infinite depth. These emotions will not exist with infinite breadth—they will not be maintained in an unending march through time—but they will exist in perfect fullness for the moment in time that they are present. Infinite depth comes and goes. It shifts and changes. And it dies.

Maintaining consistent access to emotions of infinite depth is the key to self-knowledge, to empathy, and to spiritual healing. Mindfulness and meditation—the ability to witness the fullness of ourselves and others—offers us these precious gifts. When we meditate, we sit in the face of ourselves, posture erect and heart open to whatever comes. We allow what arises to arise. We do not meditate to clear our minds or quiet our inner voices but to hear them. We cannot bring to our life what we are unaware of; we sit to become aware so that when we stand, we can bring that awareness to our lived experience. Mindfulness gives us the courage and compassion to look our own emotions and worries in

the face without fear or defensiveness or judgment, to cut through our own instincts for self-protection so that we can see our own hearts honestly, our goodness and flaws, and so we can use that knowledge in the world to be who we say we are. To both recognize and actualize in ourselves who we aspire to be. When we show up in the world in this way, we naturally show up with the accountability, patience, compassion, and tools to enact justice and alleviate the suffering of others. An ethical way of being in relation to ourselves and to others has the potential to engender spiritual healing in individuals and communities suffering from collective and generational trauma.

However, any system of beliefs or principles can easily be repurposed by practitioners for the sake of their own comfort and convenience, and mindfulness practices are no exception. The practice that I've witnessed in white Buddhist communities often appropriates much of the language and form of Buddhism (e.g., mindfulness and meditation) while turning it into a pale imitation of itself, a series of self-help techniques that promote the mental and emotional comfort of the practitioner rather than a true reflection on the self and the world. This type of meditation is the exact opposite of mindfulness: it is the deliberate distraction of the mind. It perverts one of the most introspective and uncomfortable spiritual practices—meditation—into a complex set of mental gymnastics that justifies and encourages the avoidance of true conflict within the self. And when people are afraid to see themselves, they are often afraid to see others.

When we are grounded and aware, it doesn't feel good all of the time. In fact, it frequently brings up difficult emotions because we become attentive to our own fears, grief, suffering, and limitations, along with those of others around us. Many of us are afraid to feel bad, so we pervert things like meditation, a practice of awareness, into a tool for relaxation and peace. This not only makes us less equipped to prevent ourselves from harming others but also prevents us from recognizing the harm that others are doing to us such that we can advocate for ourselves. For example, many workplaces market mindfulness as a means of helping people cope with the stress of their environment—long hours, toxic environments, and overwhelming workloads. They treat meditation as a tool to distract a drowning person struggling to stay afloat in a deep pool by proposing that if the person is “calm” enough, maybe they won't drown. Meanwhile, the employer is free to continue adding more water to the already too-deep pool. If you need relaxation, take a bubble bath and turn the world off for a while; there is no shame in this. But at some point, take the time to truly meditate. True meditation would bring awareness to the fact that you are overworked and tired,

which might cause you to fight for changes that will make your position sustainable. It might bring your awareness to the fact that you are working in a fear-based environment, which may elicit anger instead of calmness. It ought to cause you to recognize and respect your own boundaries, which, in turn, will help you recognize and respect the boundaries of others. We take responsibility for ourselves, for our own thoughts and feelings, so that we can be responsible to others as opposed to responsible *for* them. A genuine practice of meditation doesn't bring us happiness; it brings us groundedness amid chaos so that we are equipped to address our own grief and suffering, which inevitably makes us more equipped to address the suffering in our surroundings.

What's Love Got to Do with It?

We rarely consider how hollow our expressions of love can be—personally, interpersonally, and societally. We boil self-love down merely to self-care tactics like investing in a massage or a manicure or retail therapy, instead of changing the things in our lives that represent a fundamental lack of self-love, like failing to enforce our own boundaries or seek help. As a result, the love that we expect from others is hollow because it extends from the hollow love that we show ourselves. We call it “love” when someone refuses to take no for an answer, and call it disrespectful when someone holds us accountable for our actions. Which of these behaviors is recognizing and helping us move toward our best selves? Which of these behaviors shows a true lack of respect? Which of these behaviors is love?

For many Americans, our understanding of things like love, forgiveness, patience, and so on are deeply rooted in Christian theology, even if we don't realize it. Unless you grew up in an explicitly non-Christian religious tradition, it is unlikely that you've escaped the subtle indoctrination of what these spiritual habits look like. I have worked with many Christian chaplains throughout divinity school, clinical pastoral training, and in healthcare settings who are unable to show love in a way that others outside of their belief system are able to comprehend. Many of us claim that our actions and communications stem from a place of love and respect, but how often are we able to translate our intentions into actions that other people recognize and understand? How often do we even bother being intentional about how others perceive our motives? When we seek to communicate things like love, respect, presence, and so on, we have to focus on more than our intention. Love, respect, and presence are actions and embodied politics. More often than not, our actions and “good” intentions are

more about us than the person receiving them.

Not too long ago I was walking the streets of downtown Berkeley in search of a yummy dessert when I noticed a man unwelcomely shouting to every passerby about the love of Jesus. No one stopped. Most people tried excessively hard to ignore him, avoiding eye contact and walking around him, lest they catch his direct attention. I paused to listen to his message, because it wasn't offensive or harmful. He was speaking about love, which all of us crave, so why weren't people listening? As I listened to him speak while reflecting on people's reaction to him, I thought about his intentions—what was the purpose of taking this approach if people were going to ignore him and refuse to engage? If the point of his sermons was to bring people closer to him and thus toward the love of Christ, then why not choose a less alienating tactic—one that accomplished that goal?

I grew up in a conservative Christian household and attended an even more conservative school in South Carolina where we prided ourselves on the exclusivity and isolation affiliated with being “in the fold.” We believed that only a select few would understand us and our approach, and only the chosen ones would inevitably be drawn to the Church, the embodiment of the love of Christ. Those who walked away simply didn't “get it” and ultimately were not worthy. By denying us and rejecting our self-righteous approach, they were really rejecting the eternal love of Christ. And so, I wondered—what did this man think he was doing? Were his intentions in alignment with his actions?

When I reflected on the actions of the man shouting on the streets about the love of Jesus, I realized that the majority of the people he was talking to did not recognize his intentions. They experienced love in neither what he was communicating nor how he was communicating it, even if he was explicitly talking about love. I imagine that many people felt talked at and thus objectified. I imagine that many of them felt completely unseen amid his self-absorption, trampled by his exhaustive pursuit. When people feel like nothing more than a means to an end for someone else to feel a sense of power and purpose, they understandably reject both the message and the messenger.

This man claimed to be speaking from a place of love within himself about the love of Christ. He wanted to “save” people from the isolation and the detriment of their current life trajectory, but he either couldn't or didn't want to see the people he was supposedly saving. It was like watching a sailor toss a life raft while covering his eyes with one hand, hoping that the raft lands close enough to its intended recipient. When Jesus was hanging from the cross, He said, “Forgive

them, Father, for they know not what they do.” In order for the crucifixion to have meaning, Jesus Himself had to know what *they* had done in order to consent to saving *them*. He had to be open and present to those around Him, with His own power, as well as others’ transgressions in order to truly forgive them. How could He have forgiven or loved those whom He otherwise was unable to perceive? Could He have truly forgiven the betrayal of Judas or Peter without first acknowledging their transgressions against Him? Jesus’s love had to be able to hold disappointment, betrayal, anger, and pain in order for it to be fully actualized. Love for someone always begins with presence, but frequently we are so blinded by our own goals and grief that we lose sight of the people we are supposedly called to serve. The openness of Jesus’s heart and mind would not have been possible unless He were deeply mindful and attentive. The type of mindfulness He exhibited had to be more intentional than a simple relaxation practice. No—Jesus had to be plugged in to a purpose beyond outcomes in order to move through the pain and chaos of not only bearing witness to human suffering but also choosing to give Himself over in order to alleviate pain.

I’m not sure what went into this shouting man’s thought process of picking a location in a progressive town where his approach wouldn’t be appreciated. Maybe he was simply unaware. Perhaps he wanted to feel a sense of power by coercing less-receptive people into accepting his truth because this was about his own need for validation as opposed to encouraging people to get to know the love of Christ on their own terms. Unlike Jesus, he didn’t see the people for whom he was making this sacrifice (in time and energy), and his actions weren’t communicating love and respect for the people he imagined he would save. His actions caused everyone around him to feel overwhelmed and erased. So they shuffled away.

Reflecting on the disparity between this man’s actions and intentions, I began to reconsider the ways that we frequently fail to check in with others to ensure that what we intend to communicate as love is what they interpret and receive. Furthermore, I began considering how our own barriers, lack of boundaries, and perverted sense of self make it difficult to incorporate this feedback without becoming defensive. Even though love is a limitless resource, it is expressed through limited means, like time, money, and physical presence. Sometimes what a person needs in order to feel loved and respected either causes us discomfort or is simply more than we are willing or able to give. There’s no shame in that. The key is to be honest and not hide behind the way we need others to see us. For example, sending thoughts and prayers is not always the type of love that a community needs. Sometimes what they need is financial

assistance or physical presence, which we may be unwilling or unable to give but don't want to explicitly deny. Often our desire to express love is wrapped up in ego, which centers our own intention to the degree that we are unable to perceive others' needs. Love is a two-way street, and it can't negate the experience of others. Furthermore, sometimes we are simply powerless to express the unconditional love we have for others because we live in a world filled with conditions.

Each of us must be grounded enough to see the person in front of us and make a conscious decision to love and respect them in ways that both parties can recognize. In order for white people and other people in privileged social locations to truly be invested in liberation work, they must be willing to not only see themselves but also see the people they harm. They must be willing to set aside their intentions and see their impact. They must, in some sense, be willing to die: to experience death of the ego. True liberation requires that people have the presence and internal fortitude to forgo whatever safety from self-inspection society has granted them and to stand naked in front of themselves and others. It requires that we all be willing to show up with equal risk.

* * *

In order to do the difficult work of being present to ourselves and others, we must cultivate a positive relationship with compassion. Being compassionate with ourselves and others doesn't mean that we just let ourselves off the hook, avoiding accountability. Compassion is the willingness to witness our own pain as well as the pain of others—it is fundamentally based in empathy, which requires us to be honest and reflect. To have one's self-image called into question by the reality of another is destructive. But destruction is not inherently violent. As a Black woman, when someone expects to offload their discomfort onto me, and I turn them toward themselves and refuse to be an object of their projection, I destroy delusion and reclaim my own agency—thus allowing them to fully actualize their own. This is not an act of violence, but rather destruction as creation. In other words, this is God.

It is important to broaden our definition of compassion beyond the lazy and superficial definitions we've come to recognize. Compassion makes room for suffering and discomfort. It does not run, avoid, or stifle. Compassion honors anger, resentment, discontentment, and grief. There are white people and men who love me deeply and yet are powerless to either fully dismantle systems that

are causing me harm or to fully divest from those systems. I know that their nonconsensual complicity in these systems hurts them deeply, and they struggle to hold their love for me with the reality of what our different social locations means for our relationship. Their courage to be imperfect, their willingness to see themselves and to see me without letting either fear or failure dissuade them from practicing love is what makes our relationships profound and healing. They are able to sit with the discomfort of being able to touch the unconditional; to sit in their pain and mine; to imagine and feel such integrity and beauty, yet know that they will never be able to fully actualize it, no matter how hard they try. But they keep showing up fully and openly without closing themselves off from the experience of grief.

When I reflect on what I personally need from people who have inadvertently caused me harm by virtue of their social location, I recognize that I do not need them to feel guilty or ashamed. Feeling badly about one's identity or privilege leads to being consumed by helplessness, and suffering is powerless to heal. I need people to be accountable and aware, willing to unequivocally commit to attending their own suffering, not hiding or avoiding, so that I do not bear the consequences of their shrouded grief and pain. White people have always had the key to address racism and misogyny. They do not need marginalized people to actively *teach* them to be better while they argue about their intentions. The way to learn is to listen when a person chooses to describe their experience, and the way to heal is to introspect, to be attentive to the feelings that arise in us when we hear about how others have received us, and to honestly witness our own suffering so that we don't perpetuate the suffering of others. So often, dialogue is used as a distraction, an externalization of accountability that makes genuine engagement optional and discomfort unnecessary. The teachings become apparent internally when we choose to use mindfulness as a tool of transformation. We must choose to fully see and love ourselves.

White people weren't the first and won't be the last to colonize. I believe that the tactics that white people have employed to secure their privilege are unique, but for a group of people to be so driven by their fear and grief that they willfully take from others is a story as old as time. Those of us who are living today cry out against injustice while simultaneously using power in the same way that it has been used against us, by claiming that the pain we experience is more profound than any other pain throughout history. Every being has the tendency to centralize their own suffering to the degree that they lose sight of the entire context, like zooming in on a point and imagining that it represents the entire circle. Every one of us has our own particularity and uniqueness that gives

us an advantage over others in one way or another. The privilege of life is one. Just by being alive we are able to tell our story in a way that many other people and civilizations cannot.

It is therefore imperative that we all attend to our own grief. When following through on the work of showing up responsibly in relation to other beings—as lover, as friend, as ally, or as passerby—we have to be willing to see ourselves. Otherwise, how can we see and respond to others? When we prioritize our own comfort, terms like “compassion,” “forgiveness,” and “patience” quickly become weapons to escape accountability. Meditation isn’t just about alleviating our own suffering by focusing inward and excluding others, it is about focusing inward in order to radiate outward what is healing to all.

5

Embracing Boundaries and Accountability

*My hope was built on nothing less than Jesus' blood and righteousness.
I dare not trust the sweetest frame, but solely
lean on Jesus' name. On Christ, the solid rock I stand, all
other ground is sinking sand.*

—EDWARD MOTE

Accountability and Boundaries

When we aren't mindful—or aware—of our own grief, we can't be accountable for how it harms us and others. As a result, we inadvertently make other people responsible for our suffering.

Frequently our relationship to boundaries is shaped by our relationship to grief, and the consequences of not attending to grief as it relates to boundaries are expressed interpersonally and systemically. Early on, I touched on how capitalism functions by manipulating our grief, encouraging us to disregard our own boundaries and the boundaries of others. It is important to develop our own boundaries and to be conscious of them when entering into any type of relationship, while still creating space to reevaluate and craft new limits as relationships progress.

Being respectful of the boundaries of others requires us to be honest about our own needs—what we are seeking within the relationship, how we want to feel, what we need from the other person, and what we're willing and able to give. Relationships aren't only as good as what we can get from others, but they also aren't only as good as what others can get from us: being a good friend, a good partner, or a good colleague does not require us to be selfless. Having needs is human, and denying those needs—even in a well-meaning attempt to make space for others—leads us to obtain those needs in other ways, usually by manipulating people and situations in order to coerce them into giving us what we feel too guilty to ask for directly. That is, failing to articulate what we want to be freely given will eventually cause us to take those things ourselves without consent. And the people around us can feel this happening, even if they are

unable to pinpoint exactly what they are experiencing. This leads to people in relationship with us feeling resentment or exasperation, able to feel that they are being taken advantage of but unable to articulate how or why without looking like the bad guy.

Our poor boundaries with others are often an extension of bad boundaries within ourselves. This can look like an inability or unwillingness to recognize our own limits or to enforce those limits when they are pressed on by others. It can also look like a refusal to claim our own agency and power when we have it, and it is often influenced by our socialization. For example, many men are socialized to be paternalistic in their care for others, which can lead to them inadvertently taking on more than they can actually handle in a given situation or accidentally hijacking the agency of the person they're "helping." A lot of Black women are used to "pushing through" even when we are wounded and tired, simply because we believe that we have to and that we have no one else to depend on. While in some cases that is true, in others, we have more support than we realize, but we are afraid of reaching out. Sometimes this is because we fear being "too much," given that society has socialized us to believe that our presence, our anger, and our grief is overwhelming. Sometimes it's because we haven't updated our narrative of being alone and unsupported. Frequently we just don't want to appear weak out of fear of being exploited.

Even though most of us aren't intentional about our boundaries, our social location impacts the way our lack of mindfulness is perceived and experienced. Systemic oppression places unrealistic expectations on all of us—men aren't supposed to cry or have vulnerabilities, women are supposed to be caregivers no matter what, Black people are supposed to be unbreakable, and white people are supposed to be the arbiters of good news and change. In the case of Black women specifically, we often have poor boundaries with self and others because we are socialized to pick up the slack within our relationships. Furthermore, our environments often place unrealistic expectations on us out of disregard for our humanity, so we learn to bear more than we can take.

Most of us have at least one experience in either the workplace or the academy where we felt like our boundaries were not respected. When we either can't or don't listen to ourselves when pushed to our physical, mental, and emotional limits, we end up having poor boundaries that are encouraged by the environment we are in, environments that don't respect us. This impacts the people around us, because they are then called to pick up the slack within the relationship. When they get tired of picking up the slack, we risk being left

isolated and alone. For example, let's say you lose an immediate family member, but you don't take time off from work because you're afraid that your workplace "can't function without you." Maybe your company doesn't respect grief, and as a result, you're not in a position to really honor your own experience, lest you lose your job. You may continue showing up for work, but you're unable to function effectively, because you're grieving. Consequently, you start falling behind on your projects, which means that other people around you have to start compensating, just as you are compensating for your workplace's poor boundaries by agreeing to show up even when you're grieving. Just as you become accountable for your institution's poor boundaries, other people become accountable for your actions without their consent.

Most of us are not raised to be thoughtful about our boundaries, and the impact extends to every person we encounter. When we don't intentionally establish boundaries with self and others, it becomes difficult to have a healthy relationship with accountability.

* * *

I was asleep in my partner's bed the night Trump was elected. I had long felt apathetic toward American democracy—I felt that the solutions we needed could not be found by continuing to aimlessly participate in systems that have perpetuated so much injustice to Black and Indigenous people across the globe. Still, I reluctantly played my part and voted for Hillary, which truly pained me to do: to me, the presidential candidates represented Black women's never-ending predicament of being caught between a rock and a big goddamn boulder, trying to use either one of them to stay float. I was tired of making choices merely for survival.

My partner returned home late that night—exactly how late, I don't know. I heard her move around the room in a way that suggested that something wasn't quite right.

"What happened, love?"

"Trump's almost certainly won. I left early. Couldn't stay to watch the whole thing."

I was suddenly awake, but I wasn't surprised. Not one bit. Some part of me knew that Donald Trump's election was a turning point in our nation's history,

and I suddenly had hope. As terrifying and disgraceful as his presidency would be, I finally felt that I might be able to trust in America again because Trump was so egregious that perhaps a plurality of white people would no longer be able to hide behind their liberal ideologies. I was excited because now white liberals would be forced to reckon with the America that I, and many other Black women, had already known. Now they had one less shield to hide behind.

The next morning I received numerous text messages from white people I hadn't spoken to in ages. Somehow, they thought that I could save them or at least illuminate where they might've gone wrong. They were befuddled, astonished, distressed, dismayed. How could this have happened? What signs and signals had they missed? They were so sure of Trump's defeat, so sure that they didn't recognize what they were experiencing in this moment: denial, the beginning stage of grief. They couldn't name all the things that they had ultimately lost in this moment—the illusion of safety, faith in justice, a sense of belonging to a nation that reflected ideals of fairness and equality for all people. Above all, they lost their innocence. They could no longer afford to be ignorant about what it means to be white in America, about what many white people would be willing to do to protect their prerogatives. As white people, they were violently forced to shed the cloak of the first Black president and the myth of a mostly post-racial society. "Those" white people were supposed to be in the minority. It was like watching children wake up on Christmas morning expecting to see that Santa Claus had put out all of the presents, but instead finding a tired mom and dad sitting at the table shamelessly consuming the milk and cookies they'd put out the night before. There wasn't a book or instruction guide to help navigate this moment. For the first time, many white people were realizing how utterly isolated and screwed the identity of whiteness had left them. Before long, the sense of helplessness and denial transformed into rage, and they took to the streets to protest. They fought fervently and desperately, but with hollow cries that still failed to take responsibility for their own complicity. "Not my president!" they shouted. Yes, our president. This is the America we all live in.

I had hoped for a moment of clarity, but still the willful ignorance and the desire to *feel* better superseded the drive to actually *be* better. America's existence has been formed, maintained, and solidified through the same beliefs and tactics that allowed Trump to win this election. Even though I saw this moment of utter honesty and dissolution as an opportunity of redemption, I found myself frustrated watching white people refuse to take responsibility for how their relationship to self and others had brought us to this moment. Even those who had not directly fed their fear and grief still allowed it to steal food

without reprimand until the monsters had grown too wild for interference.

As I write this in February 2020, I continue to watch white women, specifically, insist that “we” as women must unite to do something about the 53 percent of “women” who voted for Trump. Just as this year was hailed as the hundredth anniversary of “women’s” right to vote in the United States. In fact, 53 percent of “women” didn’t vote for Donald Trump.³⁰ And this is not the anniversary of “women’s” suffrage. So easily are Black women invisibly caught and slayed in the crossfire of whiteness and manhood that even the well-meaning don’t realize these women are missing—from the conversation, from consideration, from neighborhoods and tables.

³⁰ Lonnae O’Neal, “The 53 Percent Issue,” *The Undeclared*, December 20, 2016, <https://theundefeated.com/features/black-women-say-white-feminists-have-a-trump-problem>.

The past is catching up to all of us, and the future is quickly closing in. Soon, no one will have a place to run. Privilege will not be enough to protect anyone from life or death. Black people have been running our entire lives, but when times have called for us to fight, we have done so with the limited resources we’ve had. Many white people are just now waking up to fully join this fight, and their minds, bodies, and spirits are adjusting to the pressure it takes to navigate these systems, even though they’ve barely scratched the surface.

* * *

I once attended a workshop with over sixty Buddhist chaplains, almost all of whom were white, and we listened to a local Native American activist named LeAnna talk about what it was like to attend to her own grief and her community’s suffering. There was a particular focus on the trauma committed against Indigenous bodies and land as a result of colonization, and she reflected on the continued violences committed against Native Americans as a result of racism and exploitation. This conversation took place during the peak of the fight against the Dakota Pipeline. The speaker spoke extensively about climate change, capitalism, and white privilege.

I was the only Black person in the room. Although our struggles were different, I felt a lot of similarities in what we were experiencing and feeling as people whose very bodies were constant war zones. With tears in my eyes, I raised my hand to ask her a question—I wanted to know what she did with her

own anger and grief, and how was she able to sit here in a room full of white people and share her pain. Her eyes grew teary as she looked at me, and she responded, “It’s now such that I don’t have a choice. We’re dying, and my people need me to do this.”

The energy in the room had shifted dramatically since the beginning of this workshop. I could feel the scattering of my colleagues, the fear and ineptitude in navigating this type of grief. All of us were not only training to sit with the grief of others who were sick and dying, but we were committed to a practice—Buddhism—that required us to sit with ourselves and our own suffering fully so that we would not avoid the pain of others, thus amplifying their suffering. But my colleagues were visibly avoiding this woman’s grief. They began raising their hands, but instead of asking questions and reflecting, they wanted to show their distance from their history and from themselves.

Multiple people raised their hand to talk about how “silly” racism is, because we are “all a little bit Native.” Hands went up to discuss what percentage Native some people were, though they were not sure from which tribe. I watched the look on the speaker’s face as she witnessed the audience’s reaction to her pain. I felt her helplessness in this moment, along with my own rage. These white people didn’t know how to sit in their own grief because nothing in life had ever required them to truly sit and look at themselves—their privilege had served as both a shield and a barrier from the full consequences of grief, cutting them off from their own humanity and the humanity of others. As a result, they ignored the grief of the Native woman sitting in front of them. Without even getting to their feet, they ran away.

When the workshop ended, I tried to grab lunch as quickly as possible because I knew that my white colleagues were carrying a burden that many Black women and Native Americans have become accustomed to carrying, but that white people didn’t know how to hold. I knew that they would look to the Black person in the room both for validation and for me to carry that burden for them, like this conversation hadn’t triggered enough grief of my own. As I grabbed my food, one white woman approached me with tears and asked if she could hug me. I sensed that she was the one who needed comfort, needed guidance and reassurance in navigating her own guilt. She wanted to feel connected, to believe that she was a good person. I turned down the hug, which amplified her tears. One person asked me what it was like as a Black person to listen to a Native woman’s pain—she was curious if it had touched on my own pain. I’ve always been protective of my suffering in white spaces because I do not want to be used

as a tool for their growth. I did not want to be simultaneously pitied for my experience and despised for reminding them of their complicity. I did not want to have my pain twisted, analyzed, and picked apart for the sake of their enlightenment. I did not want to be told about someone's friend's cousin's Black grandmother and what she had given permission for them to do. After finishing my meal, I left to go to my room, alone. I had frequently received criticism from my peers for isolating myself and refusing to participate in the community they were creating. That their model of community did not include me as anything more than a resource for feeding them was not feedback that they wanted to absorb.

I had complained heavily about my experience of attending workshops in this particular space. Yet I kept coming back because I needed the certification and training, both to secure employment and also to achieve my goal of creating spaces for Black people to use Buddhist principles to attend to our own grief without navigating the nonsense that I had encountered. I knew I was privileged to not only have the type of educational background that these places respected but also to have access to the resources to attend, including the ability to pay for the program and take one month per year off of work. I was pleased to learn that my feedback in this area was heard: a whiteness workshop was added to the curriculum shortly thereafter. One of the workshop facilitators was an African American woman who was mindful about how the presence of people of color was used, so she proposed a middle ground: she had me and two East Asian colleagues sit in a separate corner during the workshop, having our own conversation on the topic.

After the first part of the workshop concluded, the facilitators took feedback from the whole group. I was not surprised that many of my colleagues were angry and felt antagonized by having to explore their relationship to whiteness. But I was surprised that they were more upset about being separated from the few people of color. Many of them insisted that during the workshop, they wanted to "be" with us and wondered what we were doing. They expressed that their mind kept wandering to our corner in the room, despite taking up the majority of the room themselves. Some of them expressed feeling sad that they could not talk to us. I and the two non-Black people of color, on the other hand, felt safer. The irony is that this sense of separation and exclusion is what Black women take on regularly in the presence of white people, but we navigate it in such a way that they do not sense it. Even though the distance is always there, they don't notice it because they do not notice us—not fully. This was the first time my colleagues had to sit with the discomfort of not only the distance

created by white privilege, but also the inability to use that privilege to get what they wanted: access. This was the first time they were being asked to encounter themselves racially in the absence of the *other* that defined them, where normally race was present when we were present and when they wanted to talk about it, and absent when we were not or they did not. We were not there to distract, deflect, or alleviate. There was no one to accuse of “playing the race card” or “bringing race into” anything. There was no way to have the people of color talk about race instead, and then privately reassure themselves that those experiences were the result of *other* white people, *bad* white people, *racist* white people. There were just questions about what it meant for them, personally, in every part of their lives, to be white.

I continued to reflect on the idea that marginalized communities needed someone to enter into white spaces to do the work of wading through whiteness for the sake of community survival. LeAnna’s ability to name this exposed one of my many sources of rage, especially after observing my colleagues’ reactions to the workshop on whiteness. I felt that white people seek to hold Black people hostage in their own suffering by requiring us to always be in relation to them. Being forced to be in a relationship with unaware, “well-meaning” white people is like being in an abusive relationship in which the abuser will do almost anything to keep you from leaving. I think of the scene from *12 Years a Slave* where Patsey tries to die at the hands of her oppressor in order to escape their forced relationship, but he doesn’t let her. There’s a moment of panic and desperation when the white slave master, Edwin Epps, almost loses the life of the Black slave woman he has brutally violated. For a moment, this savage man who has just raped and choked Patsey for his own pleasure is almost human, he almost cries when attempting to revive her with the intensity of a child who has lost his mother, demanding that she come back. Epps could not endure the idea of Patsey leaving life, or leaving him, against his will and on her own terms. Though Epps clearly is not an example of a “well-meaning” white person, the sentiment and the fear latently pervade the dynamics between white people and marginalized communities. The exclusion must be on their terms: for us to reject them is unthinkable, a dog closing the bedroom door in the face of their owner at night.

Well-meaning white people often appear kind while holding social and economic advantage over Black people, offering scholarships, opportunities, resources, and access to spaces that we ultimately need for survival. In return, we must continue participating in systems that were built to destroy us by their very design, while white people use their relationship to us—and our presence—

to run from themselves, their grief, and their own anger. White people need the presence of marginalized people to affirm their own identity—as powerful, as leaders, and as “good people.” They are upset at any attempt we make to leave, because it reminds them of their own helplessness and vulnerability, whereby they are left with their own wounds—alone, without misuse of power to distract them. The biggest threat that white Americans fear from Black womanhood is irrelevance, and ultimately obsolescence, because we represent a reminder of their own powerlessness in the face of spiritual, existential, and physical death. If we aren’t there as a point of comparison, if we can exist outside of the mangled grips of whiteness, if they have no power here, then where do they have power?

* * *

My time in community with white Americans has illuminated the ways in which many of them grapple with, but most often evade, their “shadow side,” particularly when confronted with passive prejudice and especially when confronted with the passive racism that is endemic to American life. It is easy to assess moral accountability in situations of violence and mal-intent, in cases of tiki torches and swastikas and death threats, but how do we assess the daily normalized violence expressed through anti-Blackness, sexism, ableism, and other forms of oppression, the kinds of violence that we are all complicit in? In order to seek justice for others, we must be willing to look at ourselves and the communities we engage. We must be attentive to the forms of violence legitimized in spaces that do not challenge preexisting paradigms.

Often, people struggle to sit in their own darkness because they do not know how to be accountable. They conflate accountability with blame and shame. Most of us don’t know how to cultivate compassion in our accountability models. And as much as the internet and our current sociopolitical climate has enabled people to share their stories and build community—to, in many ways, lay the foundation for accountability—it has also encouraged exactly the opposite behavior: the obsessive curation of oneself as a *good person*, a flurry of virtue signaling and canceling. Holding oneself accountable is difficult in the most perfect of circumstances; to be immediately disgraced and dismissed in the most public and humiliating manner for any error in thought or deed adds an extra layer of discouragement. Don’t get me wrong, there are consequences for every action, and people calling attention to your actions does not make you a

human sacrifice on the altar of the “woke” ideal. But feelings of blame, fault, and having been “caught” paralyzes people into inaction either because they feel that they didn’t personally cause whatever is at the root of the issue (so there’s nothing they can do about it) or because they feel crushed under the weight of shame. On the contrary, accountability removes shame and makes room for action that stems from responsibility toward others (a mutual responsibility to care for other beings) rather than responsibility for other beings (which evokes paternalism and deprives others of agency).

The impulse to shift and avoid accountability because it feels like blame exists in all of us; but some people have far more ability than others to evade the consequences of their own actions, feelings, and responses. When things get uncomfortable, the urge to use one’s social location in order to shift the onus onto others is strong. In the case of white Americans, they never seem to be responsible for the benefits that they’ve inherited because their ancestors’ actions are not “their fault.” However, something that we did not cause (i.e., was not our fault) can still be our responsibility to address. For example, it is not my fault that a member of my family taught me to be defensive, but it is my responsibility as an adult to address how the behaviors I inherited as a child actively cause harm to people. And if someone steals money from someone else and gives it to me, I shouldn’t get to keep the money just because I wasn’t the one who stole it. Even though the system that perpetuates white privilege did not originate with the white people alive today, it still benefits them in myriad ways, large and small, and it is still their failure for not actively taking responsibility for dismantling it. The same goes for Black men, who are not at fault for the ramifications of white supremacy on Black male identity but are responsible for how they use Black women as objects to enhance and define their sense of self. The same goes for Black women whose homophobia may originate from white supremacist–informed respectability politics, but who are responsible for the way they harm LGBTQ+ Black people.

Our present selves are not divorced from the past lives and moments that created us. Racism is a part of America’s DNA, and like parents who abandoned a child in order to flee the burden of shame, the present is driven by a subconscious awareness of this unreckoning. And so when “good intentions” reveal harmful actions, ideals of community, compassion, accountability, and self-awareness dissolve into ego and anger because the recognition of having committed a transgression in the form of racism contradicts the notion of being a “good person.”

Dualistic thinking (e.g., a “good” person doesn’t do racist things) creates a recipe for shame, and many people go to great lengths to avoid the source of that shame. Brené Brown discusses the difference between shame and guilt, stating that “guilt is adaptive and helpful—it’s holding something we’ve done or failed to do up against our values and feeling psychological discomfort.”³¹ On the other hand, shame is an “intensely painful feeling or experience of believing that we are flawed and therefore unworthy of love and belonging—something we’ve experienced, done, or failed to do makes us unworthy of connection.” In other words, shame is deeply connected to grief. It touches on our fear of loss and desire for belonging.

³¹Brené Brown, “Shame v. Guilt,” January 14, 2013, <https://brenebrown.com/blog/2013/01/14/shame-v-guilt>.

This need to both recognize oneself and be recognized by others as a “good person” is not just a reference to the white Savior who seeks self-gratification by saving the *other*. Being *good* is a spiritual compulsion that subconsciously pervades and consumes people of all backgrounds to the degree that it prevents them from willingly opening themselves up to the fullness of their humanity. All of us are guilty of this one way or another: if it’s not being a *good* person, then perhaps it is being a helpful person, a leader, an intelligent or powerful person, and so on. But in the case of being a *good person* specifically, more often than not, our attempts to be seen as *good* require us to coerce people into buying into our own narrative. Furthermore, being a good person requires us to abdicate our own agency in crafting our limits while violating the boundaries of others by manipulating them into seeing us the way we need to be seen, for our own ego, as if it is their responsibility to affirm the way we need to feel about ourselves. On one hand, it is important to have others view us the way we need to be seen. This type of recognition, or “mirroring” as Austrian-born American psychoanalyst Heinz Kohut refers to it, is necessary for positive imagery formation. At the same time, we must be able to balance other people’s experiences of us with both our intention and the impact of our actions so that we can be open to change. People’s inability to face feedback and criticism or their own shadow side makes it nearly impossible for them to be held accountable, as any attempt to disrupt their exhaustively curated self-image leads to violent opposition, causing further suffering for others around them.

Because people—and white people in particular—are not socialized to take responsibility for their own actions and feelings, being in relationship to them comes at great risk to Black women. Responsibility is like communion: it is

meant to be taken in relationship with others. However, the historical and present force of whiteness destroys the opportunity for responsibility and community. White people as individuals are barely aware of the trauma they create in relationship to Black women, dropping their baggage at our feet and causing anger, resentment, and trauma to build. The trauma is often so pervasive that we can't process it fast enough. Before we know it, we find ourselves thrust into new relationships with other beings, and each relationship becomes more difficult. It becomes more difficult to communicate calmly and patiently without defensiveness, more difficult to give the benefit of the doubt or to perceive an action with trust and good faith. It becomes more risky for us to love, largely because love for others stems from a relationship with ourselves, from whom we are constantly being separated. Furthermore, relationships with others often implicitly require us to negate ourselves, so it is difficult to imagine how love can exist in these situations. These tragic encounters are like phantoms that attach themselves to our spirit, haunting us from moment to moment as we fight to be free. Carrying around this trauma is like attending a masquerade where everyone else is wearing a mask, but the scars on your face are real.

Accountability is the gift that we give to ourselves so that we can share it with others. It is the ability to open ourselves up honestly and fully, both to our radiance and to our shadow side, without judgment, fear, or shame. Accountability is led by intention, but it doesn't stop there. We must intentionally move toward improvement while acknowledging that we will fail. When we fail, we must be willing to take action by first accepting the reality and consequences of failure. People will be hurt by our shortcomings—hell, we will be hurt by our own shortcomings—yet we must do the uncomfortable work of healing the harm caused. Accountability treats grace, the ability to try again from moment to moment, like a blessing—not a get-out-of-jail-free card. Accountability is humble and receptive to feedback so that we can continue engaging, relating, and making change.

Grief, Accountability, and Anger

Many people in positions of social power who feel antagonized by so-called social justice warriors are turned off by what they perceive to be hypersensitivity, a lack of accountability, and unbridled rage. They conflate their misgivings toward “social justice warriors” with the theories of social justice itself. Consequently, their objection to social justice is a misdirected aversion, as various forms of activism actually strive to create the type of equity that many of

us verbally espouse. At the same time, the shame and guilt of white Americans coupled with the frequently self-righteous and non-intersectional approach of many “social justice warriors” often leads to a misunderstanding of needs and expectations.

I’ve argued clearly throughout this book that disenfranchised people are often forced to take disproportionate responsibility for other people’s grief. I empathize with the anger and rage expressed in social justice spaces because of my own relationship to anger and rage. As mentioned previously, anger is a form of grief, and rage is simply stifled and unprocessed grief not allowed to flow in any other direction because of the structures around it (i.e., systemic inequality). It makes sense that people who have experienced centuries of systemic injustice continue to grieve the casual physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual violence that continue to this day. In many ways, I think that this displacement makes it difficult for disenfranchised people to truly make space for grief of their own. It is essential that grieving communities give themselves permission to grieve—and even more pressing that society and especially those causing them harm make space for this and do not deny their reality and thus their personhood.

At the same time, grief can either be implicitly or explicitly used to avoid accountability. In the case of people in privileged social locations, the fear of losing whatever power they have can be an impediment to opening oneself up to the impact of one’s actions. However, in many social justice spaces oppression is a source of power, a coin that can be exchanged for sympathy and space. My experience in many social justice spaces is that any form of grief experienced from systemic oppression can be used to avoid accountability when others have been hurt by one’s actions. In these spaces, grief is used as social capital, a bargaining tool to shut down conversations that would otherwise be painfully uncomfortable. For example, I once witnessed a social media argument in an LGBTQ+ group between two Black women, LaRaine and Cora. LaRaine was feeling depressed, and Cora made a very insensitive comment. Instead of apologizing and taking responsibility for causing harm, Cora started listing all of the ways in which she experienced oppression, “I am queer, fat, femme, disabled, nonbinary, Black, and poor,” as though this made her too oppressed to be accountable for how her actions had harmed another. She used her suffering as social capital to avoid accountability when all she had to do was take the same ownership for her actions that she expected others to take for theirs.

One’s experience of grief and disenfranchisement in one area can still be used as a barrier to deflect responsibility in any area when one is causing harm to

others, no matter how many \$64,000 words you use to justify it. People in social justice spaces are just as capable of behaving like petulant children as the people they call out—legs and body too tired to move a step further toward genuine liberation. Perhaps it is suffering that keeps people in this emotional space. The barriers that they’ve built to protect themselves from constant social scrutiny have become impermeable for the sake of survival. Consequently, they can’t imagine what life might look like if they loosened the grip on pain. Perhaps the risk of seeing their own faults is too great, because the world is constantly seeing imagined faults in them, to the degree that they must always be ready to attack, reclaiming and repurposing the same tools used to tear them down. The result is that the fortress meant to keep out harm ultimately stifles the admission of new information, and anything that *challenges* one’s ego or sense of self becomes indistinguishable from actual *threats*.

I have found that people who experience privilege in a given area yet disadvantage or disenfranchisement in another struggle deeply with empathy—they do not know how to sit with the grief of their marginalization and the responsibility of their privilege. Privilege is not linear: we all have areas in which our social location allows us to wield power, whether inadvertently or intentionally, in ways that cause harm. At the time of the Ferguson uprising, I observed a Black man tell a white woman that she would never understand what it’s like to fear leaving her home. He was so blinded by his own grief that he was unable to recognize that she, and every woman on this earth, knows what it’s like to fear leaving their home. To walk home alone at night. To wear certain outfits in public. This man’s reaction caused me to wonder how he could possibly support Black women in our grief, regardless of how many Black women he had dated, loved, or married—or the ones who were his children or part of his family—when he could not open his heart to witness the fullness of our experience. Similarly, I find very little hope in “feminist” spaces because they are often overrun by white women who believe that their experiences of womanhood are all-inclusive and who don’t see policing of Black women’s bodies as issues affecting “women.”

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Multiple religious traditions, from Buddhism’s eighth precept to Christianity’s seventh commandment, urge us not to take what is not given, and yet whiteness and masculinity sustain themselves by taking what is not offered, demanding

what is not freely given, including emotional, mental, and physical energy, from the expectation that Black women set our own humanity aside for the comfort of others to requiring that Black women prioritize people's intentions over the impact of their actions. These are some of the many ways our time and energy are stolen as a result of our personhood and our boundaries not being respected.

White people expend a great deal of time and effort attempting to attract Black women into primarily white spaces to make their organizations—and thus the people in it—look “good,” but then continue to enact normalized violence against those Black people once they arrive. Capitalism and the social construction of whiteness create a scarcity model of time and resources, particularly social resources, that prevent Black people from thriving and actualizing our capacity for wholeness. Part of how I've experienced this in practice is that white Americans only want to interact enough with the *other* to feel good. Frequently, Black women are complimented on our “fresh” perspectives and “unique” insight, and we are praised for the way that our insight and different experiences generate new thought in the (white) people around us. The catch is that the presence of Black women is a reminder of white people's potential to cause harm, which neither makes them look nor feel *good*. Placing Black people in the presence of whiteness to be chewed up and digested so that white people can learn isn't the cure for racism.

When Black women say no to these dynamics, people are taken aback, as no one expects to be denied access to us. White people are used to being treated as a blank slate because of their race, being taken at face value, so they are not familiar with having to wade through the projections of other people's fears and desires. As a result, when they are met with rejection by Black women who have chosen their own emotional, mental, and physical well-being over the comfort of the status quo, it is met with hostility. Similarly, Black women are often socialized to be sensitive to the experiences of Black men, who experience discrimination based on race while living in a society that constantly reminds women to be wary of men. We are trained to be wary of Black men's grief and potential triggers as we walk the impossible path of managing our own safety in a community where men recklessly accept the privileges of masculinity to offset the burden of Blackness. When we draw our boundaries within these dynamics, we are cast as unfair, unempathetic, and bitter. The same anger that is viewed as just when attached to the plight of Black men based on race is used to silence and delegitimize Black women because of our race and gender. We are disparaged for being nothing more than “hurt” women. The fact is that many of us are hurt, but those experiences give us authority in matters of intersectional

justice and liberation, just as the pain caused by racism gives Black men a voice.

Despite their own relationship to anger and control, many white people and Black men struggle to empathize with the anger of Black women, frequently attempting to shame, invalidate, and dismiss our struggles in fighting for our lives. I've heard white people and men of all backgrounds talk about how Black women are "too sensitive" and always "triggered." The irony is that they do not consider how they themselves are always triggered, especially by their own privilege, when confronted with it. Homophobia, patriarchy, and white supremacy all function by requiring disenfranchised people to navigate the triggers of those who are painting the dominant narrative. I better not hold my partner's hand in public, lest I trigger the violence of a homophobe; I better not wear something too revealing, lest I trigger the harassment of a man; I better smile at least every few minutes, lest my white coworkers deem me "hostile." These people become triggered by any reminder of how their social location gives them "freedom," which has meant and continues to mean trauma and loss for others.

Too often, white women in particular are afraid to be explicitly angry, and in many cases, they don't recognize anger as the emotion they are feeling. So they express themselves passively aggressively, which is just another way of avoiding consequences. White women frequently are not socialized to either accept their anger or the consequences of their role in upholding social inequity. On the other hand, men are given leeway to express their anger externally and violently, although the way they're permitted to channel that violence, and against whom, is dependent upon their race. For example, gun violence is overwhelmingly committed by men, but how it is used and against whom are often informed by racial and socioeconomic factors. Over 60 percent of mass shootings in the United States are committed by white men,³² yet gun violence in Black communities is often targeted toward specific people within the community—sometimes a lover, sometimes a rival gang member, sometimes an enemy.

³² "Number of Mass Shootings in the United States between 1982 and February 2020, by Shooter's Race and Ethnicity," *Statista*, www.statista.com/statistics/476456/mass-shootings-in-the-us-by-shooter-s-race.

The anger that white people and Black men feel toward Black women who draw boundaries is the result of being alienated from any form of accountability. They become angry because for once they are experiencing the consequences of a particular system—not the benefit. That anger is only a glimpse of what Black women experience on a daily basis because of the grief we must navigate—other

people's and our own. When we reclaim our power and our energy by reflecting the actions and grief of others back to them, requiring them to sit and do their own work without the distraction of us, they don't know what to do. Their anger is a reflection of their struggle to take responsibility for their processes and reactions, the struggle to attend to their own life as Black women reclaim our own power without asking permission.

* * *

I once attended a workshop for Buddhist chaplains where we discussed the role of mindfulness in regaining neural plasticity after having experienced trauma. This workshop sometimes used the example of veterans who have returned home after witnessing the horrors of war. Systemic oppression in the United States makes American soil a warzone for marginalized people, but we rarely get an opportunity to escape the place of our trauma in order to regain plasticity. Systemic racism, sexism, and other forms of trauma politicize the very bodies of Black women, turning the bodies they live in into war zones. Being mindful and grounded reminds us that we are safe in a given moment. But it's difficult to be grounded in this moment, in our flesh, when our flesh is a site of violence. And it is difficult for us to engage in spiritual healing in a space that is reenacting the very traumas from which we need to heal.

More and more events specific to people of color—workshops, retreats, classes, meditation spaces—are arising in response to the normalized violence and erasure in white spaces. It is difficult to use meditation as a grounding technique in spaces that actively erase one's body—it's like returning to the scene of a violent crime time and time again. It is difficult to reestablish connection with oneself and regain plasticity when the trauma is ongoing and pervasive.

In many cases, when white people are asked to take responsibility for the weight of their privilege, they start hurling and throwing objects so that someone—anyone—will catch it and they don't have to carry the responsibility themselves. When we either aren't aware of ourselves, or otherwise lack the courage to truly be with ourselves, we don't take responsibility for what we bring into a given situation, even if those things were given to us. When we are afraid of taking responsibility for what we are bringing in a given moment, we lay our belongings on the floor for other people to trip on, usually people who are barely given enough room to maneuver, despite our own path having

significantly more room.

I both recognize myself as a chaplain and I strive to move through the world in a way that allows others to recognize me as the same. But my self-image does not negate the reality of my social location—for instance, as a possessor of youth and relatively good health—nor all that they entail. When I walk into the room of someone who is significantly older than I am or whose health is deteriorating, and I introduce myself as a chaplain, I recognize that I am opening myself up to the opportunity for someone to project their own ideas of youth, health, religion, and more onto me, and that sometimes those projections are expressed as grief and anger. I don't allow myself to become consumed by their suffering, but I also don't run from the reality of the privileges I possess in that moment or the way that those privileges might impact someone's experience of me. I may represent a future that their child won't have, an employee of an organization that treated them poorly, or an authority figure in a religion that has harmed them. I can be all of these things and a person trying to serve them.

This is the gift that mindfulness has given me in practice: not to distance and protect my ego from having to see myself as implicated in the adversity of another even as I work to heal it. The healing for my patients must begin with my relationship to myself. I do not run from others because I do not run from me, and I am not held hostage by my own guilt and insecurities, which means that I am able to be present without fear. Taking responsibility for my own experience allows me to mitigate the trauma of isolation associated with sickness and death without trying to fix what can't be undone.

I have a great deal of admiration and respect for people in states of transition. There's an honesty in death, just as there's an honesty in birth. These transitions require us to recognize our own powerlessness and vulnerability, and to lean into them: escape is not an option. So many of us spend our lives attempting to reclaim time out of fear, and when we recognize that we are running out of it, we feel as though time has betrayed us. But neither time nor the things that it gives us—love, life, health, money—were ever ours to claim. Many of us choose to resent the power that could dispose of us before we're done showing up, done loving, done living.

And so there are few people who want to be present with the dying. When I reflect on my role as someone who visits those who are sick, suffering, and dying, I notice that the physical pain of illness is frequently exacerbated by the spiritual and emotional pain of isolation, loss of meaning and freedom. For many, the diagnosis of illness itself is the beginning of social death as a person's

identity transitions into that of “patient.”

It takes courage to sit not only with others’ fear and grief, but also with our own. It takes courage to admit that one is afraid to die; that one is unprepared to witness another’s suffering; that one feels powerless in a society that tells them power is the ability to fix and save. Many people don’t find this courage until they reach the end of their life.

It takes no less courage to sit with a person experiencing spiritual death through protracted, systemic trauma, and no less courage to examine what we bring to those interactions, as well as what we take from them. Spiritual healing is more than an elusive concept discussed in the absence of those who are most presently affected by injustice(s). We have the tools to adequately address the root of suffering if we are willing to treat injustice and suffering as more than theories. We can no longer absolve ourselves of complicity in the suffering of others, expecting pardons and dangling salvation when we have the power to offer true spiritual healing.

6

Redefining Power

*What did Thine only Son endure before I drew my breath?
What pain, what labor to secure my soul from Endless Death.*

—CHARLES WESLEY, *AFRICAN AMERICAN HERITAGE HYMNAL* 127

There's a lot I discover about myself each time I try to learn to swim. Despite taking lessons four times as an adult, it took me years to learn how to float. I could swim laps by frantically pounding my legs against the water until I reached the edge of the pool, but if I were to fall into the deep without immediate access to land, I wouldn't have survived. During my attempts to float, I noticed that it's harder for me to stay afloat whenever my body is holding fear or anger. I knew that I had to work on letting those things go if I wanted to survive.

A friend tried teaching me to swim while we were in Cuba. She had learned to swim when she was a child, and she'd hoped that the saltiness of the ocean would give my body the buoyancy to stay afloat. I had long interpreted my fear of water as residual ancestral trauma related to growing up in South Carolina, where the conditions of slavery, the memory of the Middle Passage, and, later, restricted access to public bathing areas cut off the capacity of one generation to teach another to swim. Because my friend learned as a child, she struggled to articulate what her body felt was natural.

I fought, struggling to trust the water in ways that I generally struggled to trust my environment. But my friend tried to teach me how to submit to the waves. "It's easier to handle the waves if you just go with it. If it's a big one, try jumping into it. Let it carry you. Otherwise, you will get tired and drown."

I imagine that children who learn to swim in the ocean carry the embodied knowledge that powerlessness and helplessness are not the same. Children wouldn't think that they are weak for submitting to the waves. They haven't yet been sold the myth that they can overpower a force beyond their abilities. But we forget this as adults. Our competitive, capitalist culture convinces us that we must conquer any force outside of our will. We compete with individuals for resources and recognition; we compete with fate for outcomes; we compete with

life and death; we compete for time. The mindset of being over and against everything outside of ourselves seeps into our interpersonal relationships such that we feel that we are moving forward only if we can see others falling behind. Even when we do act in ways that are counter to our own material self-interest—that is, when we *help* and *serve* others—we expect our actions to be received in a way that affirms our ego.

The result of this zero-sum outlook causes destruction to the world and to our spirit. Our economic system not only creates but also requires an exploited underclass of *others* to support the average person's lifestyle, and it justifies this exploitation with the myth of meritocracy: a tornado of cultural hand waving that sweeps accountability ever outward and upward. It also requires constant expansion in order to exist, devouring every participant and bystander in order to acquire the unattainable: unhindered existence and survival.

Merriam-Webster defines “powerful” as “*having great power or strength*,” assuming an opposing state of lack.³³ We conquer lest we be conquered. We kill before death renders us powerless and alone. The draw to live independently drives us out of sync with our surroundings for fear of being overtaken. Consequently, we've reduced power to a thing to be *had* and *grasped*.

³³*Merriam-Webster*, s.v. “powerful,” <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/powerful>, emphasis added.

But power is a force that works through us; it isn't something we can ever own. We are shaping and being shaped by a world that is not of our own making. All beings are conduits of power, and human beings, with all of our technology and confidence, are exceedingly vast in our potential to heal and to cause harm. But we think that we possess what we only channel, and when we avoid parts of ourselves and allow our wounds to go unattended, our suffering hijacks our power, causing us to pervert its flow. Our relationship with the outside world is a reflection of our relationship with ourselves. We are so frequently at odds with the reality of our own vulnerability and shortcoming that we ravage the world and its inhabitants in order to avoid our deepest fear. Oppression is cultivated through systems founded upon the misuse and misunderstanding of power. We are constantly exposed to forces outside of ourselves that we can't control, and we are driven by fear that because we cannot control everything, we will ourselves be controlled. We use our social location to render other beings helpless, stealing years of their lives in order to buy ourselves a little more time. But at what cost? I struggle to swim. How can I trust the water to hold me when

I know that it has the power to consume me? My body feels that I can only survive in water if I am able to conquer it. Before long, I am too tired to keep swimming, and I start to sink.

Though we have perverted the use of power into something that we own and wield over and against other beings, power cannot be possessed any more than life can. We are conduits of power, not owners of it. Power is a force that flows through us in a given moment. *It* wields *us*, and through it, we respond to what's in front of us. As a child, my friend learned to float and lean on her surroundings—swimming taught her to trust herself and her environment. She had the strength and endurance to make it back to shore not because she could defeat the waves but because she could harness them: her power arose from her ability to use the power that *belonged* to something outside of herself. In other words, we are powerless. We are powerless because we do not own power, and powerful because of the power that moves through others. Once we recognize that power is not ours to claim, we are able to cast off the illusion of control and float among the waves. When we commit to become aware of ourselves and attuned to the suffering of others and when we actively cultivate a sense of nonjudgmental awareness and accountability, we make room in ourselves for power to flow freely.

There is a Buddhist chant called the Metta Sutta that wishes peace, an open heart, healing, and awakening to one's own true nature. This wish is chanted repeatedly and directed at a number of subjects in succession, but notably it starts with these wishes for the self:

May I be free from inner and outer harm and danger.

May I be safe and protected.

May I be free of mental suffering or distress.

May I be happy.

May I be free of physical pain and suffering.

May I be healthy and strong.

May I be able to live in this world happily, peacefully, joyfully, with ease.

May all beings be free from inner and outer harm and danger.

May all living beings be safe and protected.

May all breathing beings be free of mental suffering or distress.

May all individuals beings be happy.

May all beings be free of physical pain and suffering.

May all beings be healthy and strong.

May all beings be able to live in this world happily, peacefully, joyfully, with ease.

As agents of change, the work begins with us as healers, before we enter any given situation. As a person interacting with the world and all beings, the work of change and awakening begins with me. When I find myself hooked by other people's anger, grief, hatred, and delusion, I realize that their suffering has gotten hooked on something in me, something that I haven't let go of. That person has illuminated my work, but they are not responsible for holding my projections; I cannot attend to myself by attending to them.

This does not mean that we should become indifferent to the suffering of others. What we must avoid is attachment, the holding on to any form of suffering—our own or that of others. Nonattachment is not detachment; it allows us to be present to a connection in the moment, including feelings that arise from either witnessing or experiencing suffering, but it allows us to let go of those feelings when it is time. It helps us avoid reducing ourselves—and those we serve—to suffering and circumstances. Nonattachment allows us to be present to the fullness of other beings.

When we experience attachment—to our self-definition, to our perceived power, to the people around us—we do not allow power to flow through us unhindered. More often than not, we attempt to wield our attachments to inflict damage, and we create conflict within ourselves and between ourselves and others. Conflict can be caused by disagreements in intentions, understanding, and ideology, as well as disagreement over the perception and experience of actions. Conflict has the potential to be transformational. But frequently, conflict is expressed and experienced as violence.

Imagine a swimmer gliding out into sea being confronted by a wave. The swimmer is set for their goal, motivated by their own intentions, and the water is simply driven by nature. There will be times when the waves are merely inconvenient, and there will be times in which the entire direction of the swimmer's course is altered by another force. Is the struggle between the swimmer and the wave inherently violent?

Even though these two power sources are traveling in opposite directions and with opposing intentions, their interaction does not necessitate violence. It might be uncomfortable for the swimmer—and who knows how the water feels. But external resistance is a healthy and essential part of growth. When we antagonize

our opposition instead of allowing another presence to expand us, we commit an act of violence against ourselves and others—opposition is not the enemy.

When we encounter other beings who expose our vulnerability, our areas for growth, our weakness or our shadow side, we have the option to move through the discomfort of internal resistance in order to stay in healthy relationship with our opposition, or we can try to overcome their resistance, thus initiating and maintaining a system of violence. Systemic violence (i.e., oppression) thrives on fear and scarcity. Fear often masks itself as anger, and it uses anger and conflict to breed violence by coaxing us to set ourselves over and against what we perceive to be the stealer of our power. Oppression uses fear and anger to pervert conflict into violence, motivating us to hijack the flow of power through other beings and to try to hold it captive.

If we seek to change our surroundings, we must begin by changing ourselves. Only then can we support others in actualizing their own agency and in recognizing themselves as conduits of power. We cannot do this if we are subconsciously hijacking our own flow of power, fearing what may arise for us, or fearing what others may call up. We can each easily inflict systemic violence without intention by allowing our own fear to block power in another and redirecting it in ways that are comfortable for us. This perversion of power is all the more harmful in relationships with marginalized people, who may have been conditioned to perceive and respond to someone (in my case, a spiritual authority) as the ultimate holder and purveyor of power in an interaction.

It is difficult enough for people who believe they have power to willingly redefine their relationship to it and release some of its trappings. It is even more difficult for people who feel they have very little power to relinquish what little they have. In many ways, integration, growth, and actualization are privileges for people who aren't socialized into fear for the sake of survival. Not everyone has the emotional and physical space to challenge preconceived notions that have kept them alive. Because we live in a society where power is reduced to an object to be owned and wielded, it is important to understand that our social location means that we do not, we *cannot*, enter into social situations with equal power. Therefore, we do not all take equal risks when interacting with either the world or each other. My ancestors learned to fear water for the sake of survival—fear not only of the water but also of the other people in it—and I have likely inherited that fear. Even though their fear no longer serves me, I am still subject to it in a way that, for example, my white and male peers are not.

A lot of people buy into the misconception that being powerful means feeling

good all the time. Usually this is when we have just discovered or have barely touched our own power. We mistakenly associate this superficial power as strength, recognized in the ability to *do* the things that we set out to *do*. This depthless habit of imagining a goal and accomplishing it is the only type of power most people come to understand. Power itself exists beyond outcomes; it is grounded equally in our strengths and limitations. Power develops from awareness, an awareness of our own suffering that cultivates an attentiveness to the suffering of others. Some people whom we consider “powerful” are frequently anxious, which most people do not associate with power. Furthermore, they often have struggled with depression and experience various forms of self-doubt, fear, and insecurity. None of these feelings are a contradiction to power. The goal is to not “conquer” or “overcome” those feelings. Doing so perpetuates further acts of violence against the self, and any act of violence we perpetuate against our own emotional process we inevitably perpetuate against others. Instead, we must seek to accept and make peace with shortcomings as a part of our lived experience. We must try listening to them so that we can become informed by them, without letting one emotion drive us toward extremes. Experiencing power is not about being *empowered*. It is not about feeling on top of the world. It is about being *of* the world, which accepts that courage is not the absence of fear. It is just the acceptance of our limitations and the decision to use them appropriately. Experiencing power comes from being grounded enough to face uncertainty in ourselves, embracing what we don’t know. Power cannot be held on to, grasped, or caged. Power ebbs and flows, like all forms of energy.

When we think of the term “power play,” we imagine someone wielding power over and against us as we, the disempowered party, are subject to the whims of our oppressor—or even a friend, family member, coworker, or partner. Because many of us don’t know what power is, we are unfamiliar with the power that flows through us. And so, when we finally begin to come into a relationship with power, we behave like a child who has picked up a plastic knife thinking it’s a sword. Or we pull out a machete and treat it like a toy. This discounts neither the reality of institutional and socioeconomic oppression nor the consequences of such oppression, which frequently manifest in all kinds of interpersonal relationships, from the significant other who doesn’t respect your emotional labor to the employer who doesn’t respect your boundaries—the effects of misappropriated power are real. At the same time, most power plays are a two-way street. Some of us have become so accustomed to having power taken from us, especially as children, that we’ve either grown accustomed to

abdicating our own power in significant ways or we try to steal power and time from others in order to assuage our own grief. Sometimes, in the case of abdication, it is subtle, like holding on to righteous indignation against an ex for their failure within the context of your relationship, while refusing to look at our own role within the dynamic. Sometimes it is more explicit, like blaming someone for misusing the power that we gave them over us when they never wanted it or asked for it. Sometimes we abdicate our power out of fear of taking responsibility for our own actions. In the case of exploitation, sometimes we force someone into a situation where they have to communicate with us or acknowledge us, when we know that they do not want to do either. Power is a two-way street, and while many people seek to pervert it by hijacking the power of others, hoarding it, or simply misusing it, we must be aware of the ways in which we contribute to power's corruption by giving others access to our own power source.

Relationships work because people implicitly agree to play a role and carry out the function of that role. A person who under-functions within a relationship can cause just as much damage as someone who over-functions, although typically the person who over-functions is seen as the one who wields the most power and thus is most capable of misusing power. For example, our relationships with our coworkers operate under certain assumptions around our job roles, communication, timeliness, and so on. However, if one or more people refuse to play the role that they've implicitly consented to play, others on the team may be called to step in and over-function. The same goes for relationships with family and friends—a quiet person who neither makes decisions nor is honest about what they feel, yet attempts to maintain functioning relationships with those around them, equally contributes to the dynamic within a relationship as someone who is outspoken and makes decisions quickly. The power play is equally facilitated by one party's passivity and unwillingness to claim their own power, which leaves others with the responsibility of acting.

The consequences of misunderstanding and misusing power invade even the most subtle aspects of our lives, creating consequences that extend to the way we view failure, life, health, sickness, and death.

* * *

A former patient of mine, Mrs. Jackson, had fallen a few times within a short period of time and had reached the point that she was no longer able to take care

of herself. She also frequently suffered from sundowners syndrome, so she couldn't be alone in the evening. As time progressed, her son Jeremy began staying with her every night and checking in on her during his lunch break in order to bring her food and keep her company. By doing so, he was neglecting his partner, his home, his business, and his day job. Jeremy began bringing up the possibility of sending her to a nursing home near him so that he would be able to care for his mother without sacrificing his livelihood and relationships. Mrs. Jackson didn't want to go to a nursing home, as she had witnessed many of her friends, as she put it, "go in but never come out." She said that many of them had died of depression. Jeremy attempted to respect his mother's wishes, but as her condition began to worsen, she required more medical attention, physical presence, and economic resources. It became evident that Jeremy would be unable to sustain this level of care indefinitely. And so he began seriously considering placing Mrs. Jackson in a nursing home.

On my last visit with Mrs. Jackson, our conversation was focused on her overwhelming grief and fear of abandonment around being *put* in a nursing home. Paying attention to her use of the word "put," I asked if she felt helpless. She stated that she did, in fact, feel helpless, but she qualified her feelings of helplessness with the word "almost." I inquired about this further, and she stated that she was holding on to the hope of having someone move into the house to take care of her in exchange for having a place to live. There was one person whom she had in mind, but this young woman was disabled herself, and Mrs. Jackson wondered whether or not someone with a physical disability would be able to care for her. However, out of desperation, Mrs. Jackson called the young woman anyway, only to find that the line had been disconnected. Stressing the word "disconnected," Mrs. Jackson reflected on the symbolism of the disconnected phone with the feeling of being disconnected from God, self, and others.

Mrs. Jackson was an Irish Catholic woman who had relied on her faith extensively. She didn't fear death itself, but she was afraid of how she died. She didn't want to die in shame. Within the past year, she had had four friends who died in nursing homes, not because of a specific diagnosis or illness, but because they had given up. She wanted to die with dignity, not as a result of isolation and grief. I asked Mrs. Jackson if she felt *abandoned* and she quickly responded yes—she felt *isolated* and *abandoned* within her existing relationships. She would minimize her experience when talking with others in order to protect her loved ones, neighbors, and friends from feeling "guilty," as she put it, for something that was neither their fault nor their responsibility. I asked her if she felt

abandoned by anyone in particular, to which she responded, “I feel abandoned by God.... I just miss my Friend.”

She didn’t lack compassion for her son’s stress and was thankful to him for all that he had sacrificed. She expressed gratitude to her granddaughters for offering what they could and balanced her disappointment with compassion for their circumstances. At the same time, she said she felt “frustrated” because when she was young and had the *power* and *ability* to take care of herself, she frequently took care of others, including her grandchildren and her parents. While she didn’t do these things so that people would owe her, she had an implicit expectation that someone would be around to care for her.

Mrs. Jackson looked around her home and shared the memory of her husband building their house by hand after returning home from service in World War II. “We camped in a tent in our front yard until the garage was built, then we spent our first Christmas in that garage. I was pregnant with our oldest son. Two years later we had our daughter. We couldn’t afford turkey for Thanksgiving, so we gave them chicken. They didn’t know the difference. And over there, that’s where Timothy took his first steps. And in the bathroom I remember washing Elizabeth’s hair while my husband watched the other kids.”

She had lost her son Timothy the day before he was due to return home from the Vietnam War—he stepped on a landmine. Her home was her connection to him.

She told me, “He was fighting for our country’s freedom, and now I’m losing my own freedom. *I’m losing everything I’ve ever had.*”

That was the last time I saw Mrs. Jackson.

* * *

I spent weeks reflecting on Mrs. Jackson’s story because it illuminated so many misconceptions that we have about power as a result of our unexplored grief.

1. Things and People Belong to Us

This assumption is cultivated by a variety of factors in our upbringing. I grew up as an evangelical Christian, so I believed that there were predestined things that

belonged to me, including certain futures, happiness, joy, peace, safety, and health. I believed that everything that was given to me was mine, to keep and do with what I willed. Underneath the rhetoric of “belonging” is another dynamic, “control.” If something belongs to me, I control it, including the outcomes. But the reality is that if we truly have control over outcomes, then we would never lose anything without consent. Our beliefs around control and ownership extend to our relationship with power itself, because we treat power as a resource that we attempt to hoard and control. It extends to our relationship to knowledge and wisdom. For example, after that visit with Mrs. Jackson, I had to quickly head off to see another patient. When I arrived at the patient’s home, I expected to have time to jot down a few notes lest I forget “my” reflections about the previous visit. But when I arrived, the husband of my next patient was waiting for me in the driveway. During our visit, I mentally held on to all of the notes I wanted to write down. I treated my experience and thoughts as if they were exclusively mine, which prevented me from being fully present to the family in front of me. Instead of allowing the past visit to transform me, I held on to it with hopes of using it for my own purposes, even though the moment I shared with Mrs. Jackson wasn’t mine. Neither was it hers. It was ours, and yet it didn’t belong to anyone.

There is a difference between power and influence. To have power over our lives in the way that most of us understand and practice power—attached to control and outcomes—would mean that we would never die. To have power over our health would mean that we would never experience illness. We can certainly influence outcomes to the best of our ability. We can eat less salt to control our blood pressure, and we can exercise to decrease the risk of certain diseases, but ultimately we don’t have a final say over life or death.

Everything we interact with in this life is given to us, which means that it is not ours. And if it isn’t “ours,” we can’t control it. We do not have power over it. Mrs. Jackson’s struggle is something that many of us grapple with in our daily lives, though often on a smaller level. We treat our lover, our life, our house, or our thoughts as if they belong to us. We take great pride in the things that we’ve worked to attain, believing that our present circumstances are purely the result of our own doing, when in reality, we have inherited a social location, skills, circumstances, economic class, genes, health, and other factors. How can we take full ownership for running a marathon without acknowledging the ground that supports our feet? We may have had influence over the circumstances (i.e., moving our feet), but nothing belongs to us, just as Ms. Jackson’s children, husband, home, health, and life were never hers to keep.

2. We Can Be (Absolutely) Free

Another misconception we have related to power is that we can be absolutely free. Philosophers and writers have discussed the difference between freedom *to* and freedom *from*, but absolute freedom is the ability to have it all, to be neither accountable to anyone nor restricted by anything, including dependence upon the very air we breathe.

Everything that we imagine is ours, as a given, are things that we did not earn. Our life, our country of origin, our social location, our breath, our body, the very ground we walk on are inherited—we didn't build them ourselves. Therefore, when someone causes harm to us or when we cause harm to another, we are besmirching something sacred—the harm we inflict is not just against an individual, it is against power itself. It is against all of the energy and resources it took to allow that being to exist.

We are dependent on so many things in order to exist, and yet we see that dependence as a restriction on our absolute freedom. We associated dependence with coercion and lack of power, and many of us spend a fair amount of time striving for absolute freedom, striving to reach a point where we are not limited by dependence. I personally searched for this type of freedom in my career and pursuit of financial stability because I was tired of depending on people and organizations that ultimately didn't respect my time, energy, or personhood. I was done with working for institutions that sought to reduce my compassion to a commodity. After some time, I came to realize that I wasn't searching for independence *from* other beings entirely, because that was impossible, but rather I wanted agency in the relationships I chose to be in. Having agency to refuse a work environment that disrespected my boundaries meant that I was creating options more aligned with my needs. But in order to create those options, I had to come to terms with the reality that I cannot thrive in business, in relationships, or in any other aspect of my life without accepting my dependence on others. Recognizing this allowed me to choose wisely. If all of the things that we rely on were to suddenly fade, the fallacy of complete freedom would give way to reality. The concept of *you* and the independent self you've constructed would not exist.

The drive to be completely unhindered comes from fear of loss and death. We recognize grief only because we know what it means to love, to feel safe, and to connect. Even if we don't have much direct experience with these feelings, we are aware of the possibility, so we grieve the reality of losses that we have never

directly touched, because moments of grief are not free from or independent of moments of joy. We are never free from the fear and grief of losing our loved ones, even when they are happily breathing beside us, because love is not free from loss. As living beings, we each know on some level what it means to be without life, without love, because life and death are intimately dependent.

Sickness and old age force us into the reality that there will come a time when power lies outside of our own doing. There will come a time when we won't even be able to control our bowel movements, let alone whether we can stay in our home or move to a nursing home. We may become reliant upon those around us or even machines to keep us alive, which forces us to recognize the dependence of our own bodies and lives.

3. We Deserve Whatever Comes to Us

I once worked with a chaplain who would answer the question, “How are you doing?” with the response, “Always better than I deserve.” Many of us believe that if we work hard for a specific goal, then we will earn the outcome we deserve. For example, I believed that by busting my ass in school, networking and learning new skills, I would earn my dream job because my work ethic meant that I *deserved* it. I believed that I deserved to be happy. To be healthy. To feel safe. To feel loved. These are all feelings that Mrs. Jackson felt as someone who had worked hard her entire life and now felt abandoned in her old age. She didn't *deserve* this.

According to *Merriam-Webster*, “earn” is defined as “to receive some form of compensation for your labor.”³⁴ On the other hand, to be *deserving* of something is to be *worthy* of it. Rarely does what we've earned—worked for—align with what we truly are worthy of receiving. If it were so, the world would be more just in its favor. I am no more entitled to the life that I live based on my hard work than the immigrants who have worked their entire lives for safety, peace, and freedom but who didn't gain it. We all know *good* people who've experienced bad things while watching assholes experience financial, romantic, and social success. If we honestly reviewed our own past actions, we would likely find circumstances where we caused harm to others—intentionally or unintentionally—in ways that might suggest that we don't deserve all the goodness that we receive.

³⁴ *Merriam-Webster*, s.v. “earn,” <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/earn>.

Of course, capitalism plays a large part in how we define earnings and worth, and it translates into other aspects of our lives. We are socialized to believe that if we work hard in a given profession, we will earn enough money to live the American Dream, which we deserve (based on our efforts). So if we fail to attain the American Dream, the fault lies with us. It is a moral failing. This is a reality that many millennials are facing now, as we've spent our entire lives working toward unrealized dreams.

In the case of Mrs. Jackson, the way that she perceived and experienced her suffering was a consequence of our value systems. She asked what she had done to deserve her fate. The answer is “nothing.”

4. We Are Able to Manifest or Otherwise Control Outcomes with Our Mindset

Perhaps out of all of the misconceptions related to power, the notion that we have the ability to *manifest* certain outcomes or futures using our own mind and willpower to control outcomes is the most toxic.

“It already belongs to you”—your future, your dreams are already written—you just have to claim them.

I've worked with many mothers on the NICU who had written their child's name into existence only to watch their child's life dissolve into flesh and bone. Did these women manifest their fate improperly? What should they have done differently to control the outcome of their reality?

On the surface, manifestation rhetoric sounds good, perhaps because there is a theology to this approach, even though some who espouse this belief system consider themselves neither religious nor deeply connected to a specific belief system. It's liberating to feel that outcomes are in our control when living in a world in which so much seems beyond us. This theology brings the fundamental unpredictability of life back into our grasp. Our fears need not succumb to the pitiless whims of the universe. We no longer have to fear the abyss. Above all, we do not have to confront the endless possibility of failure.

We need a theology that can deal with the unthinkable, that can endure life's challenges, like when a ninety-four-year-old woman who has lost three children and her husband is suddenly faced with losing her home through no fault of her own. Like when a mother is drowning in rage, self-blame, and grief after her body goes into premature labor when her child was almost—but not quite—

physically developed enough to receive life-saving measures. We need a theology grounded in a power beyond outcomes, beyond doing, a theology that can make room for the possibility of failure because it recognizes that there will come a time when we will not be victorious, because we are human—we have limits.

Many people connect power to some form of a God or a higher power. Yet we often sell God short, because God represents failure as much as They represent success. We imagine God as a being who can come in and *do* the things that we imagine should be done, the things that we are incapable of doing ourselves. But God is not only strength and capacity: They are also the willingness and ability to accept limitations. God doesn't need to be a superhero tasked with managing our disappointments. God is acceptance itself—the ultimate sense of connection and possibility, which equally holds fear and failure along with success. Many people see death and the presence of grief as the ultimate failure of God. I watch people struggle to reconcile their grief and doubt with their faith because they have yet to open themselves up to the fullness of God, to failure and possibility, and because they believe that failure, like death, is ultimate. But failure is nothing more than reality not matching our expectations. When God does not bring about a certain outcome—when God *fails*—it creates a perceived distance between us and the power we rely on. We feel lost and discombobulated until we are able to recognize God in some other fate, some fate to which success can be attributed.

The idea of “manifestation” really comes down to the ability to produce happiness ourselves by both gaining and being “enough.” The problem is that when we frame ownership of capacity and power as the outcome, whatever we gain will, by definition, not be enough. We will still find some way to feel discontent and inadequate because what we're chasing is desire itself.

5. Powerlessness Is the Same as Helplessness

So what does it actually mean to get in touch with a power beyond outcomes?

This practice demands that we accept fear, not avoid it. Mrs. Jackson has been grounded in her own power throughout the loss of multiple children, even when facing the reality of losing her own home. Doing this requires investing in ourselves unconditionally, in our own process, such that we do not become disillusioned or distracted just because we aren't satisfied with the destination. We get attached to outcomes because what we fear is death, both physical and

spiritual. The way that we seek to combat death is by making meaning over the course of a lifetime, by taking steps that reiterate the feeling that our lives matter, thus affirming our existence. This is a form of existential fear of a life without purpose or meaning. And so we ascribe meaning to our relationships, to our sex lives, to careers, to education, to income, to everything. This is why failure is so connected to our grief, because the failure of an outcome feels like the deterioration of meaning.

Because we spend so much time trying to control outcomes while holding on to things that never belonged to us, we incidentally live each moment in anxiety and clinging. So how do we break this pattern?

We begin by accepting our greatest fear: we aren't in control, that none of the things that we imagine are ours belonged to us in the first place. We accept that we will lose everything we've worked for and have ever loved by virtue of the fact that death, grief, and loss are fundamental parts of our existence. None of us know how we will lose the things we care about—our careers, our health, our lives. It could be a gradual or rapid decline. But we can guarantee that it will happen. Our breath may escape quietly into the night, or we may go violently or in sickness. Acceptance of our powerlessness gives us freedom and moves us away from helplessness. It gives us freedom to let go instead of expending energy clinging and avoiding. When we accept and let go, we allow ourselves to be authentic and open. We develop a sense of strength and courage. When we have the courage to accept our own powerlessness, we are accepting the things that we fear. We are acknowledging that our fears of loneliness, loss of control, grief, and death are a reality. From there, we can choose to make decisions *because of* our powerlessness as opposed to *in spite of* it. We can stop imprisoning others in our own grief.

7

Moving from Theory to Practice

*All my ancient, twisted karma, from beginningless greed,
hate, and delusion. Born through body, speech, and mind,
I now fully avow.*

—ZEN VERSE OF REPENTANCE

I have often thought of both healing and liberation as *goals* rather than practices—a final destination, so to speak. This outlook made both grief and anti-oppression work feel impossible, because the reality of being attentive to how my relationship to grief and my social location caused me to perpetuate harm did not match the expectation of reaching a racially conscious or woke nirvana. Grief and fear of loss will always be a reality for humans—even if we find ways to cure disease and extend lives immeasurably, impermanence would still be the muted symphony around which we orchestrate our life’s actions.

As long as we have something to fear, we must be attentive to how we avoid that fear.

This starts by accepting that we will never be free from grief or suffering. We must diligently devote time and attention to observing how fear of loss shapes our lives so that we can minimize the harm we cause to ourselves and others. Healing and liberation are *ways of being* cultivated through practice. I have only experienced feeling *healed* in the practice of healing itself—through moments of meditation, intensive therapy, and painful honesty. I have only felt *liberated* in the process of liberation—of accepting things about myself that have caused me shame so that they no longer hinder connections with self and others. If we can let go of the idea of a “post-racial” society (presumably brought about by people who have completely healed from their own grief and trauma) and accept that we will never be too advanced in our healing journey to no longer need critiques or self-reflection—that we will make mistakes—we can start witnessing and experiencing the type of world we want to live in. It all starts with our relationship to self.

In previous chapters, we explored ways that our social location and our inherent, unexplored relationship to grief influence the ways that we enact harm

against others. The following sections will discuss important distinctions to keep in mind when practicing healing as a form of justice.

Practicing Active Patience

My partner held me as we lay in bed together, falling asleep. We had been dating for only a few months.

“I don’t move as quickly as you do. I just ask you to be patient with me.”

I didn’t respond. I lay there thinking, “Not today, Becky. You got to go.”

My partner is a white Jewish woman. I am no stranger to white women asking me for patience without understanding that my social location in America means that I am always waiting, losing time, deferring my needs so that people like her can have their needs met.

My sense of urgency, the desire to be recognized and to connect with someone I loved was a form of grief that I did not recognize. I started pulling away from what I perceived to be the all-too-familiar request to honor a white woman’s experience above my own. She felt my energy.

“There’s a difference between active and passive patience. I promise I will never ask passive patience of you.”

I was stunned. In twenty-five years, I had never heard this distinction. More poignantly, I had never heard a white woman use the term *patience* in a way that didn’t center her own experience, thus erasing my own.

* * *

The daily slog of “just wait a little a longer” is an ongoing spiritual death that we all suffer at one time or another. Social location can be the determining factor in whether the strain of maintaining grace under fire over the long term translates that spiritual death into a physical one.

Passive patience is almost always what is asked of marginalized people. It doesn’t work toward changing the conditions that cause harm—it just stagnates, idly nodding toward some future time when things will somehow be different. It asks people to stop complaining, resisting, and demanding and to just wait for the change. It’s too aggressive and unreasonable to ask the people benefitting

from the present circumstances to actually enact the change. Too impatient. The request for patience so often whispers, “We mean well. Stop being divisive by reminding us of your oppression—it makes us uncomfortable. Let us have this moment of solidarity, even if it comes at the expense of your sense of respect and safety.”

In some ways, the distress of those with social power is understandable. Change can be difficult, painful even. But pain and discomfort are inevitable and temporary parts of moving toward change and resolution, both ebbing and flowing in presence and intensity. Our relationship to it often shifts, as opposed to remaining stagnant. Suffering, however, is often either caused or inflicted and is the indeterminate and irresolvable experience of pain. It’s long-term, and its psychological, physical, and emotional impact are devastating.

When marginalized folks point out the ways that the actions of someone with more social power causes suffering, and their concerns are greeted with an insistence of silence, stagnation, and/or cooperation in their own suffering—as opposed to discussion of solutions for change—they are being asked for passive patience.

Passive patience also conflates acceptance with complacency. A commonly touted self-help theme is that we must accept who and where we are, even if that means accepting harmful tendencies, in order to change them. But acceptance doesn’t mean that we must be complacent. We can accept that a loved one is ill, but that does not mean that we sit by to see if the disease disappears on its own. A white cis woman, for example, must be willing to accept that historically and presently, she benefits from and in myriad ways—big and small—contributes to the oppression and erasure of the experiences of women of color. She must be willing to listen to the experiences of women of color to understand and accept this, and she must be willing to make a change on that basis.

Often, when well-meaning people are confronted with the abuse of privilege, they become defensive, because the reality of their actions challenges the person they’ve imagined themselves to be. Living in a society built on oppression and marginalization causes us to internalize oppressive behavior. That doesn’t mean that we aren’t “good people.” It just means we have a responsibility to be self-aware and to not prioritize our self-image over others’ suffering. Passive patience asks people to prioritize an actor’s good intentions over the hurtful actions. Someone may not be intentionally sexist, misogynistic, racist, ableist, and so on, but that’s cold comfort if their words and actions have the same harmful impact. Unlearning oppressive behaviors via self-awareness is a lifelong process for all

of us, but that doesn't mean that one has to wait a lifetime to stop causing harm.

Passive patience both maintains the status quo and is coercive. The term *patience* is often used against women of color in a way that mimics gaslighting, a denial of their lived experience so forceful and pervasive that they begin to doubt their own self-knowledge. Women of color are asked to be patient when the fight for "women's rights" addresses only the problems that white women share; "you'll be next" they are reassured each time, as though problems specific to Black and Brown women are not also women's problems. They are asked to be patient when vocalizing their needs is too intrusive and when their efforts to create a more welcoming, intercultural, and anti-oppressive social climate make other people uncomfortable. And in the case of Black women specifically, we often begin to doubt our own experiences and develop Black Superwoman complexes to maintain the strength to exert yet more passive patience. When we complain about the pain we experience as marginalized folks—or walk away because we've had enough—we're told that we just weren't patient enough, that we needed to wait a little while longer until things changed. We're made to feel as if our inability to sit indefinitely with unnecessary suffering is the root of the problem, not an institution's unwillingness to work to change hurtful and oppressive conditions.

While it's true that one or both parties may have to deal with hurt feelings and unprocessed trauma, it's important to recognize that social power requires one party to carry greater responsibility in the effort of reconciliation. Marginalized folks desire safety and healing like all beings. They are already carrying their own generational trauma as a result of systemic inequality; they don't need to also be responsible for carrying the burden of their oppressors' emotional discomfort. Indeed, the more they volunteer to carry that discomfort, the more free those with social power are to continue believing that their part of world is just and that the real problems are elsewhere.

Passive patience demands self-sacrifice and martyrdom. It steals time by promising a future that will never come without action and that will hold the *patient* person hostage in their own suffering. It requires that the *patient* person use their physical, mental, and emotional energies as fertilizer for other people's dreams. And it requires the marginalized to place their full center in causes, institutions, and actions that will suck them dry and give them crumbs in return.

Active patience, on the other hand, is a multiparty commitment toward change. It involves mutual agreement to reach a common goal and asks time only in increments to provide proofs of movement toward that goal. Active

patience requires the bearer to be shown rather than told that change is coming. It promises spiritual healing in bits and pieces rather than a slow and steady spiritual death.

Active patience requires respect for the autonomy, agency, and personhood of each being involved, because all parties engage with Lindemann's "shared reality." For example, when Native women complained about the appropriation of their culture(s) and the erasure of their histories by white folks during the Women's March in 2017, an ally begging active patience would have not only listened but also sat with their pain. They would have named the discomfort of their own complicity in another person's degradation and begun searching for ways to minimize the direct harm they caused in that moment while committing to strive toward larger structural changes in the future. They would have asked questions to understand the Native women's concerns and brought that understanding to others whom the activists might not reach.

Active patience isn't perfection, and it doesn't guarantee lack of conflict. We are human, which means mistakes are expected. There will often be setbacks on the path of healing and change. Conflict is inevitable, even in the healthiest, most nourishing relationships: we need it to grow and learn. It can be used to guide us and facilitate connection. Active patience recognizes that there will be conflict, but it uses conflict as an opportunity to reevaluate and adapt, not to silence by force.

Lastly, active patience doesn't allow setbacks to turn into complacency. Just because something is hard and/or we struggle to "get it right" doesn't mean we give up on the pursuit, especially when it leads to justice and healing for another person. Active patience continues growing and shifting, collectively. Settling for microaggressions over overt discrimination, opting for mildly offensive as opposed to in-your-face offensive behavior, doesn't address the root of the issue. Rather, it allows us to ignore underlying causes and settle for "good enough."

For spiritual healing to be accessible to everyone, regardless of social location, we must cultivate a society that considers a request for patience to put the onus of labor onto the asker rather than the asked. Saying "please be patient with me" to a suffering person should not be commonly understood to mean "I am suffering and need *you* to wait," but instead "I recognize your suffering and am joining you in discomfort or suffering by doing my own work in order that neither of us has to suffer."

Finding Forgiveness

As spiritual healing begins to take place, so does reconciliation between those who have wronged and those who have been wronged: the personhood and power of each is recognized and honored. We often call this “forgiveness,” but there is an important distinction between forgiveness and a pardon that is often ignored in the quest for reconciliation.

Forgiveness is a key component to any healing- or justice-oriented framework. It allows the transgressed to work through fractured feelings created by the transgressions of others. This is a difficult process in the best of circumstances, but is all the more difficult when it is attempted without active accountability and participation from the transgressor, and especially while transgressions continue. It is incumbent upon a transgressor, when they ask for forgiveness, to first acknowledge the harm and their part in it and then to ask the transgressed what they require for healing to occur.

What instead often happens is that the transgressor asks for forgiveness, but means that they want a pardon. A pardon ignores the healing process of the transgressed and centers the comfort of the transgressor. A pardon stunts the emotional and spiritual growth of both the transgressor and the transgressed by forcing the transgressed to remain in a state of pain, anger, and fear longer than necessary while the transgressor continues committing dehumanizing acts. Often, social location determines which direction a pardon is supposed to move in and who is expected to bear the emotional burden of that pardon.

The first step a person promoting spiritual healing by asking for forgiveness must take is acceptance of accountability. A transgressor must not only be willing to accept that they have caused harm, but they must also accept where they are emotionally—that is, acknowledge their own hurdles and shortcomings—in order to heal their own wounds. Only when they begin to heal themselves can they show up in truth and transparency with the transgressed. When a transgressor learns to accept where they are, they are able to look at their actions, heal their own wounds, be responsible to another human being, and finally, work toward allowing forgiveness to take place.

The second step to forgiveness is asking what the transgressed needs in order to heal. This step is often a locus of retraumatization, as the transgressor commonly decides what is necessary for reconciliation on their own and carries that out. By not recognizing that it is the transgressed who is best suited to determine what they need in order to heal, the transgressor is depriving that

person of agency and personhood. And if the transgressed does not respond positively, it is common for the transgressor to believe that they themselves are the ones who are being harmed because their gesture is not appreciated. In this way, the “reconciliation” process becomes an exact duplication of the original transgression.

Forgiveness seeks to rectify wrongdoings. Forgiveness allows those harmed to feel safe again, reclaim agency, and tend to wounds masked by anger and fear. Forgiveness centers the apology language of the transgressed because sometimes the way a transgressor offers reconciliation is not the way the transgressed understands reconciliation. Above all, forgiveness requires the transgressor to take on the inconvenience of change so that the transgressed may heal.

On a societal scale, it is common for people in positions of social power to demand forgiveness from marginalized people when what they desire is a pardon, a reconciliation that requires neither introspection nor change. When the pardon is not granted, the marginalized are blamed, told that they have a chance at spiritual healing when, in fact, their chance is simply to comfort the already comfortable and carry their burden unacknowledged and alone. It is often said that “holding on to anger is like drinking poison and expecting the other person to die.” But asking forgiveness for a harm that is not acknowledged and will not stop is like force-feeding someone poison and expecting them to live. Forgiveness is not a charade. If, when a person demands forgiveness, it must be given to them—and at the time and in the manner convenient to them—the “forgiver” is an extraneous member of the interaction.

I used to live by quotes that made me feel like I was entirely in control and thus entirely responsible for feelings associated with normalized violence. For example, during graduate school, I tried to take responsibility for my own pain because the people around me (mostly white) did not take responsibility by *changing* the institutional structures that elicited feelings of harm. Frequently they were not oblivious to the institutional racism, sexism, and other injustices, but they often treated me like a Jesus-like figure of sorts, as if my presence and insight could save them if only I were willing to suffer. The staff and students would complain about the lack of diversity, yet would not take simple steps to make the environment less hostile in order to successfully recruit and retain more diverse staff and students. And then they would project their emotions and guilt onto people of color for absolution.

I used to feel a bit of guilt for experiencing so much unsuppressed rage and sadness. But how can marginalized folks be expected to *let go* of anger when the

same things keep happening every day, across time? When no number of protests and conversations and no amount of diverse presence in institutions will change the actions of our oppressors?

While it is true that we have control over our emotions to some degree, it is irresponsible to pretend that feelings and reactions don't involve the participation of other beings. In every moment we are acting on and being acted upon by someone or something. Emotions like fear, sadness, and anger often require external input, even if the event that triggers those emotions occurred in the past. If hurt, pain, fear, anger, and sadness occur within human interactions, it takes mutual cooperation to heal the damage.

Marginalized people lose time in the present and in the future due to the poison laced in their everyday lives. They experience higher rates of depression, shorter life spans, and greater health problems, and they are told that the solution is to keep drinking it and pretending its water.³⁵ The slow spiritual death minimizes time spent and enjoyed with loved ones by co-opting potential moments of bonding and joy with conversations around safety, frustration, and grief. And then they are told that the answer to save themselves is to participate in institutions—like the academy and a voting system—that require them to cosign their own dehumanization. The answer is never to name injustice or call for accountability but to pardon their transgressors and to heal themselves.

³⁵ Lindsey Cook, "Why Black Americans Die Younger," *U.S. News & World Report*, January 5, 2015, www.usnews.com/news/blogs/data-mine/2015/01/05/black-americans-have-fewer-years-to-live-heres-why.

Many transgressors feel that forgiveness is owed to them simply because they say they are sorry. But "sorry" is a remorseful feeling that neither addresses the injustices of the past nor proactively alleviates harm in the present or future. The purpose of that kind of forgiveness is not healing but absolution from guilt. It is not the responsibility of the wounded to take on the weight of an oppressor's guilt. Above all, it is not a requirement for the oppressed to alleviate the burden of the trespasser by uttering the words, "I forgive you." It isn't for the trespasser to set the conditions; forgiveness is neither about nor for the oppressor—no one is entitled to feel or be forgiven.

It is okay for transgressors to have feelings regarding the realization of their social location. It is even okay to feel a bit of guilt, but it isn't productive to stay there. Having and expressing feelings isn't the same as using your own pain to avoid accountability for the pain you have inflicted on others. And forgiveness does not require the negation of a transgressor's feelings—merely honesty with

themselves about them and a commitment not to prioritize them over those who have been harmed.

A karmic view of what justice might look like—not a direct payment of a debt to an individual, but the gradual spiritual healing through self-betterment over time—is a powerful lens through which to look at spiritual or physical death at scale. Some transgressions, in order to engender forgiveness, require the devotion of many lives over many lifetimes. For example, this nation was built through genocide, displacement, erasure, and slavery of many classes, sexes, races, and bodies over time. Three hundred years of history can't be erased in one proclamation or one changed law. If it took many lifetimes and many lives slaughtered for us to stand where we are, then it will take many lifetimes of work to heal that damage. Forgiveness is not cheap. For Christians, it took the blood of the Divine to offer the mere prospect of redemption. Before Christ, each sin was repaid through the sacrifice of life. How many lives, past and present, have been slain, so that oppressors can possess privilege without having to experience the consequences of seeing their own reflection?

Willing self-sacrifice is not what most people want to hear when they ask for forgiveness. Most people want a quick fix. They want something easy and comfortable. Sacrifice is hard work, and it takes the form of willing change, uncomfortable conversation, honest self-reflection, and the patience to be with unsettling emotions resulting from new realizations.

Many of us have experienced harm from the misuse of power, so we seek to both erase ourselves and all signs of power before we enter into relationships with others. For many of us, society (and religion) taught us how power could be used to cause harm—not heal. Healing our own wounds, and thus our relationship to power, patience, and forgiveness, allows us to claim our own agency. When we authentically claim our own agency without trying to either overpower others or deny the existence of our own power, we open up the opportunity for spiritual healing.

Transitioning from Salvation to Liberation

During my hospital chaplaincy on-call, I'd usually receive an average of four to six deaths each night. This wasn't typical for my peers, but the on-call gods saw fit to overwhelm me. On one night I was particularly backed up trying to give each family the attention and support they needed while filling out paperwork and maintaining pastoral composure. After visiting the family of a deceased

infant in the labor and delivery unit, I immediately went to my next family on the medical intensive care unit (MICU), where I met an African American man named Mr. Hughes for the first time. Mr. Hughes's decline had been rapid and his loved ones had not been prepared. In his final moments, he was attended by his large family from the South Side of Chicago, who had begun gathering in both the family meeting room and the patient's hospital room. Mr. Hughes's son, Marcus—a thin Black man, six feet two, with baby locs covered by a bandana—particularly struggled with his grief, expressing shame at the fact that he couldn't control his tears. Marcus paced his father's hospital room back and forth, his pants hanging low on his waist, exposing his boxers, trying to release nervous energy. It didn't work, so he would frequently step outside to smoke a cigarette.

I had gotten a page about a death in the unit next to the MICU as I was on my way to meet the Hughes family, but I called the charge nurse who paged me and let her know that I had multiple death visits that night and would get to each family in the order I received the page. I spent over two hours with the Hughes family and the MICU staff. The family was waiting for the patient's daughter to arrive so that we could pray and discuss funeral arrangements. While the daughter was on her way, I informed the nurses on the MICU that I would be going next door, explaining that another patient's wife was waiting patiently at her deceased husband's bedside, and I would come back as soon as I had spent some time with her.

Mr. and Mrs. Steinman were a well-educated African American couple in their late sixties. Mrs. Steinman carried her grief with the silent dignity and poise one would expect of a woman who fought fervently in the Civil Rights Movement while intimately befriending well-known activists in her youth. Both she and her husband held advanced degrees, and their children were even more socially and economically successful. I appreciated learning so much about the history of the lifeless man in front of me, including the love he shared with his wife. But I was only able to get twenty minutes into my visit before I received a page from the MICU charge nurse I had spoken with. Typically, I would step out and update nurses regarding my whereabouts, but given the patience of Mrs. Steinman, and the fact that I had informed the charge nurse of my agenda, I simply silenced the page and continued listening to Mrs. Steinman's story. It went off again. And again. After the fourth time, I put it on full silence, but we had been so interrupted that Mrs. Steinman clearly felt hurried. We quickly wrapped up the paperwork, and I walked back to the MICU, annoyed that another family's needs were cut short due to frantic pages.

When I arrived, I was shocked to see seven security guards gathered outside of the family conference room where Mr. Hughes's family was waiting. I asked the charge nurse what happened, and she informed me that one of the other nurses had called security because she felt intimidated by the presence of Mr. Hughes's son. All of the security guards were African American men, and the look on their faces betrayed their anger and discomfort at having been called to police a young Black man amid his grief. They simply stood to the side, waiting for some other form of intervention. Up until this point, the two nurses I had been working with on the MICU were African American. When I asked to speak with the nurse who made the call, I was led to a short, brunette white woman sitting in the nurse's hub with shame and fear written across her face.

"What was the reason for your call?" I asked.

She replied, "I was scared of the son. He kept pacing back and forth, I didn't know what to do."

Both I and the charge nurse walked back to the security guards and told them they could leave. Before heading out, one of the security guards shook Marcus's hand and apologized for the family's loss. Although the family was clearly shaken and ashamed by the incident, this subtle acknowledgment of what just happened seemed to give them a sense of recognition that visibly relaxed them. As we made our way back into the family room, I heard Marcus's aunt scold him about how his attire puts white people on edge.

* * *

The Zen Buddhist chant of purification calls us to not only look at the circumstantial evidence of benefit and harm caused in our own lifetime, but to consider what we have inherited across generations, as a result of our ancestors' actions, and take responsibility for how their karma has impacted our lives. People frequently misunderstand karma to be vindictive energy for bad actions. Karma is simply the consequences of our thoughts and actions, good and bad. Karma is the ripples caused by throwing a stone in a pond: even after the ripples are no longer visible, there continue to be consequences below the surface and at the edges of the water.

Because America is smitten with its own myths of meritocracy and of just deserts, karma plays a larger role in our understanding of social location than we commonly acknowledge. If someone is experiencing poverty, abuse, or

misfortune, we want to know the whole story, and we search for causes that reaffirm that this could not happen to us, that this happened to them because they did or didn't do something. The myth of meritocracy is in part the myth of power in its most attractive and most harmful forms: that we can win control over ourselves and others, and deserve it.

This tendency doesn't exist only among those in fortunate circumstances—even those in unfortunate ones often suffer doubly for the sneaking suspicion that they have done something to deserve their suffering. Many Black folks in America ascribe to respectability politics, maintaining that a woman is undeserving of love and respect because of what she chooses to do with her body sexually, looking down on other Black people for speaking slang, and generally justifying why someone not only is but *should be* treated with less respect. We do this because we have bought into society's messages about what Black people need to do in order to avoid unfair treatment. If we pull our pants up, stop twerking, speak properly, and “don't look so threatening,” then maybe we won't be targets of racism. And if we look like we don't deserve racism, then maybe it won't happen to us. This sort of victim blaming causes many of us to enforce the arbitrary rules of white people—even when white people aren't present—in a desperate attempt to save ourselves. After all, if we are responsible for our own oppression, maybe we have the power to change it. Because freedom and power have historically functioned through our oppressors' hands as commodities to *grant* us, we feel forced to adopt unjust definitions of worthiness for the sake of salvation. This temporary salvation from proximate harm often comes at the expense of our actual liberation or salvation from harm over the long term.

From slavery to the Civil Rights Movement, our oppressors' opinion(s) mattered if we wanted to survive. Their thoughts of our worthiness mattered because it impacted our chances of getting enough food, proper clothing, medical care, and so much more. It mattered if we wanted to make it from sun up to sun down without getting arrested for violating Black Laws. These basic things did not free us, but they saved our lives. The more whole-heartedly we bought into the logic of them, the easier it was to make it to the next day, though even that wasn't guaranteed.

The thing about racism, though, is that Black people can never become worthy within its framework. By its very principles, we are not meant to be saved, let alone liberated. Today, many of us still have to rely on white people to employ us, give us medical benefits, and approve loans for our houses and cars. We continue our ancestors' survival tactics of making ourselves as familiar as

possible to white people so that we can get our basic needs met. We focus on things like not wearing dreadlocks to a job interview, dressing business casual so that a cab might stop for us, and speaking and presenting our bodies in ways that broadcast harmlessness and deference to white people in order to be safe in each moment. We focus so hard on these things that we often lose sight of the fact that we're doing them at all, spending so much emotional and mental energy on it that we don't have any left to wonder why we should have to do this in the first place, what "respectable" means, and why these are the only methods of proving oneself intrinsically worthy of respect.

Salvation is about making sure that we get what we need to make it to the next day. It is a daily struggle that drains life from the spirit in order to give it to the body. Liberation allows us to exist safely every day, with all of our mental, emotional, and psychological needs met. Liberation is a model for spiritual healing.

As we make small steps toward accessing our own self-determination, it is important to be intentional about how we craft new models of liberation. From the Civil Rights Movement to Black Lives Matter, we can observe shifts in our collective approaches toward gaining equity. When those of us who are physically, mentally, and emotionally able take to the streets in protest against the injustices committed against Black bodies, it is important for us to consider who we imagine ourselves protesting against. Who is in conversation with us? What type of bodies do these people have? What's their gender? Race? In short, who models the power and the "rights" we want?

When we say we want "equal rights," we aren't fighting to have the "rights" of white women. We aren't fighting to have the "rights" of poor white folks. We aren't fighting to have the "rights" of LGBTQ+ white folks or disabled white folks. Whiteness—like any other social construct—is complex, and explicitly picking apart the identities within whiteness that build its complexity can help us realize the existence of oppressive models in our own movements, models that attempt to liberate one part of a community at the expense of another. An intersectional approach to the complexity of oppressive systems is the only approach that will allow us to fully dismantle those systems.

Being afforded relative ease due to one social identity does not negate the possibility of experiencing hardships from another, and vice versa. No social location, however privileged, exempts anyone from the fact that life is difficult. It often simply means that one is given more grace in ways that count, even when life deals you a shitty hand. It could mean that someone leaves you alone

even when you accidentally wander into a rough part of town. It could mean that your family inherited property, despite being relatively poor, and they were able to use that property as collateral to get you out of a tight spot that otherwise might cause long-lasting adversity. These categories are more fluid than we imagine—social location is determined by any number of intersecting identities. We have to be open to the fullness of ourselves and to each other in order to create authentic paths of liberation for everyone.

In any case, we do not live in a box, and actions do not happen in a void. Actions have consequences. They always impact others, even if it's indirect. If I decide to shame a Black woman for what she does with her body sexually, that means that I'm shaming anyone who acts like her. Shame has long lasting effects, so I'm spreading those negative effects not only throughout my social community but throughout the world.

Merriam-Webster defines a “system” as “a set of connected things or parts forming a complex whole.”³⁶ If it were not for our relation to each other, power dynamics and inequality would not exist. For example, in a classist system, wealth cannot exist without poverty. In a racist system, whiteness cannot exist without nonwhite bodies. Racism, sexism, misogynoir, transmisogyny, and classism are all systems. It is not possible to successfully dismantle systemic racism without deconstructing the other systems of inequality that inform it. By definition, systems are connected. The oppression we experience in our daily lives, whether within the body of a cisgendered Black male or a cisgendered white woman, are informed by the oppression others experience in different systems.

³⁶ *Merriam-Webster*, s.v. “system,” <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/system>.

In the past, liberation movements have attempted to treat these systems separately. The Civil Rights Movement focused on racial injustice and frequently failed to address issues of gender, and the women's liberation movement focused on gender-based discrimination and frequently failed to address issues of race. The fight for LGBTQ+ rights focused on several major issues, like marriage equality, but often to the exclusion of issues that were more pressing to the less privileged members of the LGBTQ+ community.

What most “liberation” movements have, in fact, fought for is not liberation for all, but the acquisition of additional prerogatives for those in the movement with the most social power already. For example, public spaces have often been

treated as space for men because patriarchy tells us that a woman's place is at home. Specifically, public spaces are treated like white men's spaces because white men are the default owners of everything. So if anyone who isn't a white male enters that space without permission, they are a target. Black men aren't fighting to walk down the street with the safety of white women. Nor are Black women. They want to occupy space like white men.

Entirely too frequently within Black liberation movements, we inadvertently fight for the "rights" of cisgendered, straight, able-bodied white men without realizing that these men do not have "rights." They have privileges that they conflate with "rights"—privileges that come from maintaining multiple systems that limit the liberation of others. These privileges, if shared, would continue to rely on multiple systems that limit the liberation of others: white men would not be able to move through the world as they do if the rest of us weren't kept in place to give them room. We can never be better than that which we imitate. Any model of liberation shaped by the privileges of an oppressor will continue our own oppression and the oppression of others.

Sometimes we mistakenly hold on to one (or more) systems of oppression because it works for us on an individual level, even if it causes harm to others in the community. It's easy to focus on ourselves when moving forward, because society doesn't teach us to think collectively. For example, throughout the Civil Rights Movement, it was believed that one of the major tragedies of racism was that Black men didn't have the privilege to be the "head" of the Black family. The disgrace of Black men was that white men controlled Black women's bodies and reproductive lives. So it was thought that part of the destruction of racism would require more Black men to have full control of Black women's bodies. In other words, Black men could only be "free" if they were able to hold full power over another human being. Often, when discussing "family values" and "upholding the Black family," we rely on a patriarchal model, which encourages the subjugation of women. But Black men do not need to subjugate Black women in order to be fully human. Access to one's own humanity never requires restriction of another individual's humanity. Humanity isn't a limited product. There is no scarcity. Like power, it is not something we can take and own.

Despite the fact that queer Black women are leading our current movement, the elevation of women's voices—especially queer women's voices—has been met with violence, resistance, and erasure. Our fight for freedom has often been plagued with homophobia, ableism, and respectability politics, perhaps because we still feel that our right to liberation must be "earned" from those in power. In

order to break the cycle of our own dehumanization, we have to let go of some of the lies we've been told about deserving our own freedom.

The United States has given Black people a laundry list of reasons why we don't deserve to be liberated. They said we were uneducated, so we fought for access to the institutions they kept us out of. They said we have children out of wedlock, so we worked hard to build the nuclear family they prevented us from having for centuries by denying access to marriage institutions and forcibly ripping apart families for sale. They said Black women are too domineering, so we suffered patriarchal abuse in silence. They said Black men are weak, so they performed hypermasculinity in music videos and films, telegraphing that they too could abuse women. They said we are morally corrupt and hypersexual, so we clung to their religion, which shames sexuality of all kinds.

When even these performances of karmic dessert did not result in our liberation, we turned to ourselves. We used language like "Kings" and "Queens" when referring to our legacy and inheritance as Black Americans. We adopted this language to assert our worthiness in the face of oppression. But even here, we were modeling our language and our liberation on the deprivation of others: a king or a queen cannot exist without subjects—inferiors. In many contexts, even within the king/queen dynamic, it is assumed that the king holds authority and power over "his" queen. Holding on to language that allows us to shape our identity around another person's inferiority is dangerous. We run the risk of perpetuating oppression.

In our fight for liberation, it is important for us to be conscious of *all* the members of our communities as we attempt to move forward. Intersectionality means that we cannot discuss Trayvon's right to walk home in a hoodie in a white neighborhood without considering that many Black women cannot walk to the corner store in a skirt within their own neighborhood. It means that we cannot discuss the racial motivations behind incarceration without realizing that Black women are the fastest-growing prison population and that queer and transgender Black youth are incarcerated at exceedingly high rates.

Our relationship to the world beyond American soil is important to consider when crafting a liberation model. For many Black Americans, it is difficult for us to imagine having privilege relative to other Black bodies impacted by American imperialism. But the lifestyle of people in the United States—even the poorest and most marginalized—is maintained by America's ability to extract resources from other nations, often nations of color. Many countries that Black Americans celebrate as great places for Black people to live are inhospitable to

non-American Black people. There's diversity in the experiences of privilege and racism within the diaspora. The fact that we can leave our country and have welcomed access to another nation's resources because of our nationality is a privilege. Many non-American Black people are not able to access resources outside of or even within their homeland. And just like white Americans, even though we did not create these systems that negatively impact the Black diaspora, we still have relative benefits. It is important to keep the conversation open so that when we say "Black Lives Matter," we mean *all* Black lives.

It's hard to remember that Black Americans are not the only Black people when our American identity allows us to just focus on ourselves. When I was in undergrad, one of my Black Jamaican roommates would ask me to reflect on my social location as an American. She cared very much about what was going on in the United States, despite feeling guilt about not putting forth as much effort back home. When I asked her why Jamaicans didn't just protest, she told me that there wasn't enough hope. She felt that her people feel so powerless in the face of American imperialism that the idea of protesting to change something doesn't even seem feasible. This means that even our *right* to hope, our *right* to fight for freedom is a privilege: there are Black nations that do not feel they have the power to challenge white America at all.

Being American does not cancel out the oppression of being Black with intersecting identities in the United States. And occupying this position of privilege does not make us bad people. Although we are not directly responsible for the ways that systems were set up before us, we do enjoy the unequal fruits of those systems, and we are not absolved of our responsibility to redistribute them. When life deals us a hand, we're accountable for looking at the cards and playing responsibly. Each of us has inherited our own form of ancient, twisted karma. Sometimes it's named through social location. Sometimes it functions more insidiously. It is incumbent upon us to awaken to our own true nature, which extends beyond our lives, beyond this moment, and beyond individual action.

By granting each other self-determination, by seeing each person as they need to be seen as opposed to how society says they should be seen, by listening when someone says we've hurt them, and by not running from ourselves and the weight of our responsibility, we can work toward dismantling the systems that cause harm. We can work toward holistic healing. Liberation is not a goal; it is an intentional practice. We become liberated by practicing liberation every day, within our own communities. Sometimes we will make mistakes and hurt each

other; but we must own our mistakes and keep working.

Enacting Justice

Amid the political rampage of Donald Trump's hate-filled campaign and the constant plea of Black Lives Matter, we find ourselves at an impasse where push and shove are all but spent, and we have no place to go. We are outraged. We have exhausted ourselves at every turn, decades have gone by as we continue to assert our right to humanity, our right to breathe, our right to exist without borders, our right to live without fear.

We're angry because we are fearful—we feel helpless within systems of oppression that trap us within ourselves. We feel powerless to protect ourselves and our loved ones against racial injustice, misogynoir, police brutality, gender discrimination, LGBTQ+ violence and erasure, cultural genocide, and more. Our anger is the lament of our wounded humanity, a cry that will no longer be suppressed. Our generation is done asking—we are not begging to be addressed. Justice is our demand.

But how do we recognize or seek compensation we have never encountered? Considering that so much of our nation's history is built on pardoned crimes like genocide and slavery, how can we possibly know what justice looks like?

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There is a final step to spiritual healing that, unlike forgiveness, does require some additional labor from the transgressed. The idea of practicing empathy toward someone who has caused harm is difficult to swallow. It is much easier to demonize those who have done destructive things, to make them someone outside of ourselves and not recognize that we perpetuate some of the very same harm against others that we rebuke against ourselves. It is easy to see in empathy the suspicious signs of a pardon and to refuse it outright.

Empathy isn't about understanding another person's experience, because there will always be experiences that I'm unable to understand. Saying "I understand" makes another person's experience about me. Empathy is about acknowledging the limits of my own knowledge and experiences. Empathy calls for imagination. I may not know what it means to suffer certain types of death, but I can imagine. Imagination stems from a connection with my own pain.

Americans are taught from a young age that justice involves making a transgressor suffer in the same ways that we have been made to suffer. For example, when Daniel Holtzclaw was convicted of sexually assaulting thirteen women, many of whom were low-income Black women, people rejoiced that justice had been served, and some even hoped that he would experience his victims' pain—that is, sexual violence—in prison. The American criminal justice system is built on retributive punishment, so it makes sense for people, in the midst of their justified and unhealed anger, to see this as justice.

Further, many people, due to their social location, have experienced enough denial of their own personhood that they have been disconnected from their own humanity and their own capacity for empathy. Consequently, they may feel that their only path to vindication for their suffering and affirmation of their personhood is by making the oppressor feel their pain. However, perpetuating brokenness and injustice neither adds to their own healing nor addresses the roots of their oppression. We can never be better than that which we imitate: mimicking a retributive system in the name of justice is senseless. Punishment and accountability are necessary components of spiritual healing, but they must not devolve into retribution.

Justice begins with empathy. And in order to cultivate an empathic practice, we must not be afraid of evaluating ourselves in the process. Marginalized people are constantly asked to “be the better person” by forgiving, comforting, placating, and otherwise expending emotional energy on behalf of people who have not done the same for them. However, empathy for a trespasser neither excuses their actions nor requires the sacrifice of self. Empathy is necessary in order to hold someone fully accountable, in order to build paths of justice, in order to create change and to facilitate healing. It's not enough to reactively punish a trespasser once a crime has been committed. If we are to create sustainable change, we must first be willing to see ourselves in the humanity of the transgressor, even when their actions are inhumane.

Actions and experiences are limiting—there will always be experiences with which we cannot fully empathize. But when we expand our definition of empathy to center the living nature of the individual as opposed to their actions or experiences, and when we acknowledge that each of us has just as much potential for evil as we have for goodness, we open ourselves up to the fullness of ourselves. We create authentic paths for justice and spiritual healing.

On the other hand, retribution relies on *othering*, which is a form of dehumanization. Othering is the very standard (and myth) that perpetuates

injustice. When one is cast as *other*, one is removed from the measure of humanity that cultivates empathy. This is the same mechanism by which people with social power have created marginalized identities. We cannot heal systems of injustice if we do not see ourselves, or at least the possibility of ourselves, in those who both harm and have been harmed. A call for empathy neither suggests a pardon for the crimes committed nor does it make empathy for the marginalized unnecessary. Furthermore, empathy does not mean that one cannot hold a perpetrator accountable for their actions.

Those who have internalized the consequences of dehumanization end up projecting their own degradation onto others. For example, there are many Black women who are victims of patriarchy within our own community, yet perpetuate violence against Black girls via patriarchal thinking in the way they both pardon Black men who have caused harm to girls and femmes and by raising their sons to believe that masculinity entitles them to behave as they wish, without responsibility for their behavior.³⁷ The consequences of bodily oppression are reflected in the states of our hearts and minds.

³⁷ Erykah Badu has frequently defended the actions and mentality of Black men who have violated Black girls, particularly R. Kelly, whom she has called on Black communities to “welcome back.”

We tend to identify with either the identity of an oppressor or the oppressed, rarely recognizing how these identities intersect, thus making us simultaneous oppressors and victims of the same systems that harm us. In our society, a lack of full accountability becomes the norm, making it is easy for us to distance ourselves from those who oppress and to avoid cultural accountability for our role in creating them. We are all victims and perpetrators of oppression, and we must all be held accountable in stopping it.

It’s often safer to dehumanize or to otherwise categorize an oppressor as a monster. For example, we often demonize white police officers, and men like Daniel Holtzclaw, Ariel Castro, and George Zimmerman. If they’re not human, they’re not one of us, and we don’t have to claim them.

Accountability begins with empathy, since we must recognize and center the humanity of a trespasser prior to holding them accountable. Deeming any perpetrator a monster suggests that they have no control of their actions, as a monster cannot be held accountable by the standards of humanity. Monsters are innately inhuman. Instead, we must acknowledge how our culture allowed them, taught them, perhaps even encouraged them to commit their crimes. Most of us are conditioned to shape our identity in relation to the subjugation of others,

even if it is the subjugation of a child.

This conditioning is inherently traumatic: it limits the transgressor's access to the fullness of their own humanity by shaping their identity in relation to the inhumanity of *others*. It distances them by cutting them off from being in community with other human beings. Privilege promotes fragmentation and trauma, and trauma coupled with misused power creates the recipe for oppression.

We continue to maintain a cultural standard that conflates justice with retribution, and in our quest for vengeance, we lose sight of our own humanity. Any model of justice that doesn't place spiritual healing at the center of its mission is both incomplete and insufficient. Dehumanizing a perpetrator in the spirit of retribution doesn't center the needs of victims, nor does it restore their sense of humanity. To enact punishment from a place of vengeance is a quick fix to make the transgressed feel better, much as the asking of a pardon is a quick fix to make a transgressor feel better.

Rejoicing over the suffering of others does not erase their violations of us—it just adds the brokenness of another human being. Justice centers the need for healing and reparation of the victim's humanity. It centers the wholeness of community. One does not become whole through perpetuating injustice. Wholeness is created through the power to hold a perpetrator accountable and the right to access resources that promote healing through safety and self-determination. Holding an oppressor and ourselves accountable is the most humane thing we can do in order to offer justice, healing, and hope to the oppressed. We can't embody our oppressor by acting from a place of vengeance, thus dehumanizing those who hurt us, and expect a different result than the society we already live in.

8

Conclusion

*God told Hezekiah, “fella, you got to die.”
You better set your house in order, you got to die.*

—SOUTH CAROLINA BLACK BAPTIST HYMN

I was doing my daily rounds on the NICU when I saw the shadow of an adult standing in Zora’s room. Janeisha was at work, so I interrupted my scheduled visits to satiate my curiosity. I slid open the glass door leading into Zora’s room and pulled back the thin privacy curtain. The song “Come on in the Room,” by Georgia Mass Choir, was playing, which I hadn’t heard in over a decade. When I stepped in, I saw a nurse, Agnes, standing by the computer, singing and talking while charting.

In theory, I liked Agnes. She was probably in her midseventies, a few months from retirement after having worked on the NICU for over thirty years. I knew that she was a good nurse who really cared for her patients. But she always treated me differently than she treated our other coworkers, turning each interaction between us into a minstrel show. Whenever we spoke, she would roll her neck around, use butchered slang, place her hand on her hip, and wag her finger excessively as I stood baffled. I felt disrespected and insulted to be reduced to a caricature based on my race and gender.

When I saw Agnes in the room, I began making small talk with her until I felt comfortable asking her opinion on Zora’s prognosis. “I’m not a doctor, and I’m not God,” she said, “But they say that hearing is the last thing to go. If that’s true, then I want her to know that she isn’t alone. I try to come in during my shifts to talk to her. Janeisha left a gospel CD, so I thought I’d play it in case it reminds her of her mother. She still can’t swallow, so I change her clothes at least three times on my shift so she’s not soaked in drool. If she can hear me, I want her to know that she is precious and she is loved.”

I was moved by Agnes’s compassion toward Zora. She was committed to giving her—and every Black child I saw her interact with—dignity, even as she communicated with me in ways that deprived me of it. I suppose it is easier to bestow dignity upon a baby because they have yet to develop personhood; they

have yet to exist in ways that make us feel shame or fear or grief. They remain blank slates onto which we can project our wildest dreams.

Yet it made me reflect on whether or not Agnes's performance toward me was an attempt to be close, to express some form of recognition for me as a Black woman. I wondered if she thought that she was strengthening the tie between us, not fully aware of how society's stereotypes about Black womanhood combined with her own whiteness created a rift. Perhaps she was trying to say, "I see you," while not knowing that the messages she had internalized about Black women were, in fact, preventing her from seeing me. Perhaps she sought to bring me closer by mimicking the differences she imagined kept us separate. The insidiousness of systemic racism is that, like many cultural norms, it doesn't require our conscious participation—we are always internalizing it and then externalizing it, moving through the world the way we've learned is "normal." What makes racial trauma so reprehensible is that it takes the basic human desire to connect and turns it into a weapon without our consent. This takes many lifetimes to change.

* * *

The purpose of this book is to guide people toward freedom—not freedom in the individualistic, self-indulgent sense—but the type of freedom that stems from an honest relationship with self in order to allow healthy connections with others. Most people turn to egotistical, selfish models of freedom because they feel trapped and powerless. Most people don't know what genuine liberation, let alone power, actually look like, because they are too afraid to be painfully and deeply aware. They are afraid to die. Freedom isn't attained by ignoring or conquering fear: it is attained by moving through it.

The corruption and misuse of power through grief manifests in the way that we manipulate access to freedom and time. Social privilege is the use of power without accountability or consequences. However, privilege frequently doesn't stem from situations in which power is being actively wielded. In many cases, social privilege and the power that stems from it are too subtle to recognize—unless we are attentive.

White Americans can no longer afford to treat social activism and sustainability like a trend. People are dying at a larger scale as a result of their inaction. For centuries, people of color across the world have borne the

consequences of imperialism and colonization. We have actively warned against the consequences of Western expansion. For centuries, Black people have teetered along the boundaries of life and death so that white Americans can have more moments of happiness, freedom, and time. As I write this, Black Americans currently account for around 70 percent of coronavirus-related deaths in several locations, despite not making up even close to half of the population.³⁸ And Flint, Michigan, is still battling for safe water. Air pollution across the African continent, caused by factories and plants that have allowed Western nations greater technological convenience without experiencing the health risks associated with “advancement,” experience disproportionate harm and death. And yet, even though many African, Caribbean, and South American countries have been destroyed in the pursuit of Western development, the consequences of climate change are now the whole world’s problem, and most especially the problem of the countries that had the least opportunity to benefit from development and industrialization that is causing it. Just as these countries are beginning to gain access to the technologies that have required the forfeiture of their land and lives to develop, they are being asked—no, required—to participate in the cleanup as if they had equal participation.

³⁸ Joseph Williams, “As Experts Feared, Black People Are Disproportionately Getting and Dying from COVID-19,” *U.S. News & World Report*, April 7, 2020.

And yet, white Americans are not the only ones with work to do. It’s imperative that each of us starts attending to our own grief, not to the exclusion of, but for the sake of, the world. Although the consequences of stifled grief tend to flow downhill from social power, we all have a lot to grieve, and we are each capable of causing tremendous suffering as a result of our relationship to fear of loss. The type of work required from each of us must extend beyond self-care, therapy, and relaxation. It must involve deliberate internal exploration of our deepest fears and desires.

Grief can either be used as a tool to bring us closer to ourselves, and thus to each other, or it can tear us apart. We are so busy running from loss, like a child hiding from the boogeyman, that we don’t care who we knock down along the way, so long as sorrow stays far enough behind. But loss doesn’t need to be feared, and neither do we, ourselves. When we choose to use mindfulness and meditation not only to become aware of our own grief and how it impacts our life but also to accept the inevitability of loss and of failure, we open ourselves up to new possibilities. We open ourselves up to beauty. To connection. To liberation and justice.

I believe that we are all born whole until we take our first breath. From the moment of first human contact, we find ourselves inevitably and repeatedly cracked through interactions with broken strangers—some we will choose to know, to forget, to love, to regret. If we are blessed, we may experience cherished moments of wholeness in either solitude or a loved one's arms. But humans were never meant to be independently whole: our missing pieces are what drive us to connect with each other when we collide.

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PHOTO BY DAJUANA JONES

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Wade served as a hospice and palliative care end-of-life caregiver in Los Angeles County. Over the past five years, she has supported people through grief and transitions as a birth doula and a lay-ordained Buddhist chaplain working in jails, on the mother and baby units of hospitals, and in people's homes. Wade uses her practice as an end-of-life caregiver to encourage those who are not facing illness, death, or dying to be open to what grief can teach them about relationship, life, failure, sex, and desire.

She wishes to expand the world's conception of grief beyond concrete loss and to call attention to the numerous ways our experiences of grief impact the way we (mis)understand power, craft self-image, and approach boundaries, conflict, and accountability.

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