

## **Black Trauma is Real – The Sustained Pursuit of Healing is Imperative**

### **Introduction**

I'm finalizing this essay not long after a 29-year-old Black man Tyre Nichols died in a Memphis hospital, just days after a horrendous beating by six police officers (five Black and one white) who had initially pulled him over with the claim that he was driving recklessly. Beyond pondering the legitimacy of the stop, there are a number of other questions to be asked about the incident that include the following obvious ones: 1) Why did the policemen, with overwhelming force, feel the need to swarm an unarmed and by-appearance unthreatening person with such aggression?; 2) Why did Nichols run away after being accosted?; 3) What in any of his actions, as shown in the video recording of the beating, warrant the extreme violence meted out by the burly officers that left Nichols a battered pulp, bleeding without and within? Well aware that good answers to these questions are necessarily multifaceted, I hope to contribute to such answers as I follow-up on my 2019 article "This Revolution Cannot Be Televised – African Americans in Search of Liberation"<sup>1</sup> with an address of the issue of trauma in the Black community<sup>2</sup> which is receiving well-needed attention in a number of settings including Brite Divinity School.

In the 2019 article I analyzed the situation of African Americans as an oppressed and vilified people, and identified consequences of the historical and contemporary terror directed

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<sup>1</sup> *Black Theology – An International Journal*, Volume 17, 2019, Issue 1, 1-21.

<sup>2</sup> As said in the 2019 project, my use of the term "community" does not presume that African Americans are a monolithic group with common views on all or even most things. However, I use it with appreciation of how racialization has for centuries "lumped" together all people with any degree of African ancestry. Thus, whatever the situation might have been without this occurrence, most African Americans have had to accept that their destinies in this nation were bound together. Thus, underlying the diversity that characterizes this ethnic group are certain challenging conditions that are common to the vast majority of this group because of a 400-year history of slavery, legal segregation and alienation as its members pursue life in an ethos that reflects the supremacist vision and values of the still dominant Euro-America. See *note 1*, page 2.

toward us over 250 years of chattel slavery, 150 years of Jim Crow and Neo-Crow racism,<sup>3</sup> and showed how many are trapped in the misguided belief that we are properly identified with ancient Israel as portrayed in the narrative of Exodus and Conquest and promoted in the grounding mythos of our country.

As a result, we have become committed to the “American Dream” with its social and economic arrangements that were actually designed to produce and reinforce a Euro American ruling class and the structures of white supremacy they oversee. Linked to this commitment is an affinity for the normative center of the nation where the metrics that establish worth in an imperial ethos and signal success in a capitalist system are anchored. As a consequence, while subject to violent reminders of our discursively assigned place as the fearsome-uncivilized other, we have developed aspirations and habits that reflect a faulty sense of what divine favor looks like and how it applies to Black life in America. It was with this scenario in mind that in the 2019 essay I promoted “intentional self-marginalization” as the disposition to be adopted by African Americans, this involving resistance to the lure of the normative center and in which the most intense confrontation will be with ourselves as we seek to generate a radical shift in our situation in this nation. As I said in that document, this is a radical move because it would require a community to “face squarely the root of its situation – this undertaken in order to upend the prevailing order, destabilize those who most benefit from an oppressive status quo and reshape the social system. The consequence of such action is that the deprived are given access to resources and opportunity for meaningful progress.”<sup>4</sup> I said further:

Those of us committed to radical change must contribute to our own disruption as we break established patterns of thought and radically shift customary ways of seeing and doing things. This unhinging and repositioning, which typically involves reexamining the foundations of the venture at hand and reimagining what is possible, are significant to what I consider revolutionary.

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<sup>3</sup> “Neo-Crow” is what Resmaa Menakem calls the period from 1966 through the present. See Resmaa Menakem, *My Grandmother’s Hands – Racialized Trauma and the Pathways to Mending Our Hearts and Bodies*, (Las Vegas, Central Recovery Press, 2017).

<sup>4</sup> Michael Miller, “This Revolution Cannot Be Televised: African Americans in Search of Liberation,” in *Black Theology – An International Journal*, Volume 17, 2019, Issue 1, 2.

Reactions to the use of “self-marginalization” by persons otherwise sympathetic to my intentions have made me appreciate the way this verbal form of the term “margin” generates anxiety in persons who identify with the victims of long-standing processes designed for exclusion and erasure. So, while I must persist in employing the root notion to represent an approach to life that contrasts radically with the normative framework generated by the socio-cultural, economic and theological “center” of our nation, I now adopt the modified expression “intentional self-margination” to portray my continued desire to encourage resistance while honoring the worry some will still harbor that we will in effect be satisfying the intentions of those who have sought to diminish and even erase the significance of Black people in these United States.

Considering important elements of life on the margins, I, like a growing number of persons within and outside the African American community, am convinced that a vital influencer in many of the ways we operate economically, socially and personally is the traumatizing impact of the unceasing violence against our very humanity that has been perpetrated over the duration of Black life in America. Here “trauma” is understood as overwhelming experiences that cause intense physical and psychological stress reactions that have lasting adverse effects on functioning and on physical, social, emotional, or spiritual well-being. As such, effectiveness in the pursuit of the revolutionary change I continue to promote requires concentrated address of this phenomenon from a number of angles. Therefore, in this essay I will employ insights from therapeutic, psychological, neurobiological and religious spheres to pursue analysis and propose processes of radical remediation of this malady. I pursue this venture with the appreciation that not every anxiety-generating occurrence is traumatizing and that sometimes this phenomenon is simply the available excuse for irresponsible behavior.

While the primary focus is on members of the African American community, it should be obvious from some of the sources utilized that the explorations have significant relevance for individuals and groups outside of this setting. In the final analysis, it is my intention to contribute to the conditions that heighten the possibility of flourishing for as-many-as-possible in the African American community. This state, according to Barbara McClure, is a by-product of ongoing activities that include formidable challenges and pain to be overcome and which

involves conscious contentment, a sense of meaningfulness, satisfaction, and at least occasional joy.<sup>5</sup>

## I

### **The Work Ahead Requires Minds and Bodies that are Being Healed**

What we're being encouraged to envision and pursue requires hard, sustained effort that demands much physical, mental and emotional resilience as a well-practiced way of viewing the world and approaching life is turned on its head, that is, revolutionized. So, how do we enable persons who have been traumatized communally and transgenerationally throughout the historical dynamics of this nation to develop the resilience and fortitude to accomplish this revolution? It is with the appreciation that the result of 400 years of affliction is not just misguided thinking but deep-structured psycho-social injury that I remind the reader of Black Liberation Theologian William Jones' 1973 declaration of purpose. "The purpose and first step of a theology of liberation is to effect a radical conversion of the mind of the oppressed, to free his/her mind from those destructive and enslaving beliefs that stifle the movement toward liberation."<sup>6</sup> In response, I declare that the purpose that most beneficially overlaps with the need for material viability and broad cultural stability across the African American community has much to do with the nurturing of a "New-Healed Consciousness" that counters a false or conflicted consciousness that is undergirded by a distorted consciousness.

The false consciousness to which I allude is generated by our ensnarement in the discursive force-field of the grounding mythos of this nation which, among other things, has resulted in a perception of where we stand in relation to the narrative of Exodus and Conquest as it is in the Bible and binds us to its socio-cultural and economic center for our self-understanding, our vision of success and our sense of belonging. As I have claimed in the 2019 essay, African Americans are not the favored ones with whom the God of Exodus and Conquest has covenanted, brought out of bondage, and has been leading to a promised land. Instead, our

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<sup>5</sup> Barbara McClure, *Emotions: Problems and Promise for Human Flourishing*, (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2019), 166, 167.

<sup>6</sup> William R. Jones *Is God A White Racist?: A Preamble to Black Theology*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1998), 41.

socio-economic instability is just one of many marks of the shattering that resulted as God's discursively "favored" Euro American people landed on top of us, took us into bondage, and continues to treat us as the savages this nation's ruling narrative has socialized them to perceive us to be.

In the face of this ongoing oppression, some in the African American community who were nurtured to view pursuits of justice as the highest expression of Christian commitment have become "nones."<sup>7</sup> This has involved movement from false consciousness to "conflicted consciousness." With honest examination of the situation of our community, they are recognizing that pious massaging of the dominant narrative and imaginative appropriations of its biblical foundations will not address the radical disjunction between the expectations associated with the mytho-theological legacy they carry and the actual situation of Black people. While African American "nones," like their white counterparts, have walked away from the institutional church they do have difficulty letting go of the hope they have been socialized to draw from these legacies. At the same time, they are beset with the nagging sense that what they hold on to may well be a false hope that is often used to manipulate them by internal and external forces.

### *Trauma Explored*

That which I've just identified as "shattering" lies behind false consciousness and hinders the reevaluative work that has so far resulted in a conflicted consciousness for a growing number. It constitutes the distorted consciousness that is a constant threat to all processes of the general African American mind and spirit. This distortion is influenced significantly by what Dr. Joy DeGruy characterized in 2005 as "Post Traumatic *Slavery* Disorder" (PTSD), which refers to psychological wounds that have been carried and reinforced across generations as a result of repeated-uninterrupted direct and indirect traumatic events/experiences of a large percentage of

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<sup>7</sup> The term "nones" has been popularized by the Pew Research Center's Annual Report which over a number of years has tracked the decline of American Christianity. As used in this framework, it refers to the growing number of religiously unaffiliated that has been a growing share of the American population. Under this general category falls those who say their religion is "nothing in particular," and also atheists and agnostics.

the Black community.<sup>8</sup> Providing dramatic portrayals of the “continual, violent attacks on the ... body, mind and spirit” of our slave ancestors,<sup>9</sup> DeGruy reminds us that explicit violence toward Black people has persisted into the present era. It is with this violence in mind that I’ve often wondered if the regular slaying of Black men by the police, who oftentimes are witting or unwitting agents of white supremacist interests, is not intended to serve a similar purpose as lynching, that is, to terrorize the Black community into submission and conformity.

This consideration has been complexified through my exploration of Resmaa Menakem’s discussion of racialized trauma and its healing. He makes the telling point that in pursuing action that terrorized and thus traumatized African Americans, Euro Americans were themselves expressing their own legacy of trauma. As he put it, “White bodies traumatized each other in Europe for centuries before they encountered Black and red bodies,”<sup>10</sup> The frightening character of their partially trauma-driven actions against Black and Red peoples<sup>11</sup> is not only explained by Menakem’s reminder that traumatized people often pass on their trauma response to their children “as standard operating procedure.” It is also due to the fact the white supremacy (white-body supremacy), with the binary construction that “juxtaposes the virtuous-exceptional humanity of Whiteness to the villainous-threatening inhumanity of Blackness,”<sup>12</sup> does not allow many Euro Americans to acknowledge that they carry within them consequences of the barbarity that characterized the life of their European and American ancestors. As such, much of their contemporary performance is fueled by “dirty pain,” which for Menakem is “the pain of avoidance, blame, and denial.” In further elaboration, he suggests that “When people respond from their most wounded parts, become cruel or violent, or physically or emotionally run away, they experience dirty pain. They also create more of it for themselves and others.”<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Dr. Joy DeGruy explores this phenomenon in the text *Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome: America’s Legacy of Enduring Injury and Healing*, Portland: DeGruy Publications Inc., 2005). For a quick introduction to DeGruy’s theory, see the following presentation by Professor DeGruy: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XRQ-Ci6LwVw>; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PMVRyD4UIHk&feature=youtu.be&t=20s> (3/18/2015)

<sup>9</sup> DeGruy, *Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome*, 14-15, 116. She reminds us that chattel slavery lasted 246 years in this country.

<sup>10</sup> Resmaa Menakem, *My Grandmother’s Hands: Racialized Trauma and the Pathway to Mending Our Hearts and Bodies*, (Las Vegas, NV: Central Recovery Press, 2017), 11.

<sup>11</sup> Menakem, 61-62.

<sup>12</sup> Michael Miller, “This Revolution Cannot Be Televised” *Black Theology*, 15.

<sup>13</sup> Menakem, *My Grandmother’s Hands*, 20.

In his explication of racialized trauma, Menakem claims to be building on the work of DeGruy,<sup>14</sup> and he paints a “full-bodied” picture which involves the total self reacting to overwhelmingly threatening circumstance in the interest of safety and survival. A system that has been shocked by such a threat moves quickly into protective mode, and “our rational brain can’t stop it from occurring, and it can’t talk our body out of it.” The acute anticipation of danger around every corner and the terrible thing that could overtake one at any moment become the dominant posture in life, even if this makes little or no cognitive sense.<sup>15</sup>

It is important to Menakem’s therapeutic intention that we recognize that the dynamics of trauma with its associated emotions are not limited to our “thinking brains” but are most associated with the complex system of nerves that “connect the brainstem, pharynx, heart, lungs, stomach, gut and spine.” Mentioning that neuroscientists call this system “the wandering nerve” or “our vagus nerve,” he characterizes it as “the soul nerve.”<sup>16</sup> Given my special interest in the vital role played by the components of the body that are encased in the cranium, I’ve typically employed Daniel Siegel’s reminder that the activities of the brain are not just in the head but are directly connected to the complex networks of nerves throughout the human body that relay data upward to it.<sup>17</sup> Here, Menakem would remind us that all our sensory input has to pass through the unthinking reptilian part of our brain, which, being reflexively protective, processes them in terms of the question: “Is it dangerous or safe.”<sup>18</sup> Siegel pushes our consideration further by his reminder that when our survival reflexes have been activated the emotion of fear pushes our cortical areas to find danger “sometimes when a threat is truly there, and sometimes when the sense of danger is only our brain’s creation.”<sup>19</sup>

Characterizing the underlying injury by means of analogy to Post Traumatic *Stress* Disorder,<sup>20</sup> DeGruy identified symptoms such as hyper vigilance, exaggerated startle response, irritability or outbursts of anger, difficulty concentrating, difficulty falling or staying asleep, a sense of foreshortened future, feeling of detachment or estrangement from others etc. It is not

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<sup>14</sup> Menakem, 58.

<sup>15</sup> Menakem, 8-9.

<sup>16</sup> Menakem, 5.

<sup>17</sup> Daniel J. Siegel, *Mindsight: The New Science of Personal Transformation*, (New York, Bantam Books, 2011), 43.

<sup>18</sup> Resmaa Menakem, *My Grandmother’s Hands*, 6.

<sup>19</sup> Daniel J. Siegel, *Mindsight*, 242.

<sup>20</sup> Joy DeGruy, *Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome*, 114.

difficult to imagine the many disturbing ways this combination of symptoms will continue to be exacerbated and cause severe dysfunction in interpersonal and communal interactions as persons carrying the legacy of initial trauma and multigenerational trauma operate in the midst of ongoing psychic<sup>21</sup> battering from a dominant culture that is structured to terrorize and subordinate us.<sup>22</sup> Not surprisingly, Menakem adds that in many African American bodies it has led to a variety of physical problems like high blood pressure, diabetes, obesity, compromised immune systems, heart problems, digestive disorders, chronic inflammation, and musculoskeletal disorders.<sup>23</sup>

Menakem makes much of the resilience African Americans have developed while operating in the midst of an oppressive system. He's correct that "the thick emotional skins .... we've developed has served us well, protecting us from a great deal of damage ...."<sup>24</sup> At the same time, as is dramatized by his grandmother's oversized, puffy hands, the result of picking cotton from a young age, and her "hobbit" feet that had been ripped up as she walked bare footed in the fields full of thorns while picking cotton,<sup>25</sup> there is lasting disfigurement that must not be overlooked or glamorized. There is an interesting difference of opinion between Menakem and DeGruy on the extent of the impact of generational trauma as it is reinforced in our daily lives (privately and publicly). For the latter the disfigurement becomes normalized and eventually becomes one's culture. Menakem's challenge to this characterization – "it can start to look like culture. But it isn't culture" – seems to be motivated by concern that the healing he promotes could be thwarted by the impression that as culture the traumatized condition is a settled aspect of Black life in America. While very sympathetic to what I perceive to be Menakem's concern, I'm of the view that his suggestion that what might look like culture "is a traumatic retention that has lost its context over time"<sup>26</sup> does not fully capture the compounding impact of multiple levels of expression in a range of interconnected settings that are repeated and reinforced over long periods of time. For this reason, intentional self-margination should be understood as "dedicated"

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<sup>21</sup> Here I use "psychic" in its broad range of meanings to cover what therapists refer to as psychological and some religious persons associate with the soul.

<sup>22</sup> In *Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome* DeGruy reminds us of the persistent and systematic violence, which included rape: 76-77 and lynching: 89-94, 115, 121 etc.

<sup>23</sup> Menakem, *My Grandmother's Hands*, 131,

<sup>24</sup> Menakem, 52.

<sup>25</sup> Menakem, 4, 52.

<sup>26</sup> Menakem, 39.



space away from the intimidating gaze of the traumatizer, for sustained and multifaceted address of our situation with the appreciation that it may only yield good results in the long run.

We gain additional insight into likely features of what DeGruy calls “culture” through Wonhee Anne Joh’s discussion of the trauma resulting from the violence associated with British colonialism. In the process Joh alludes to a loss of language after traumatic experiences. Anticipating discussions to come, I suggest that this loss can be partly explained by the impact of stress hormones and more so the ways dissociation undermines functions of the limbic system. That said, could it also be because there is actually no language that can properly express the extent of disorientation and quality of pain that results from some types of physical and psychical violation?

It is toward this insight that Elaine Scarry points by her claim that pain is isolating because it actually shatters language. In *The Body in Pain* she makes the startling declaration that “Physical pain does not simply resist language but actively destroys it, bringing about an immediate reversion to a state anterior to language, to the sounds and cries a human being makes before language is learned.”<sup>27</sup> Consider then, Dorothee Sölle’s suggestion that “powerlessness and speechlessness go together”<sup>28</sup> and allow our minds to travel back to the forced separation from Africa and the horrors of the middle passage. Referring to the middle passage as “bitter waters,” Barbara Holmes suggests that “moans are the utterances of choice when circumstances snatch words and prayers from bereft lips.”<sup>29</sup> Add to this the unrelenting brutality and dehumanization of 250 years of chattel slavery, almost 100 years of legal segregation that included the terror of lynching and arbitrary imprisonment, and the contemporary social dynamics designed to keep us reminded of our inferiority. I’m confident Holmes and Joh would agree that while moans might assuage they do not eliminate the deeply rooted sense of violation experienced by generations of African Americans that has been reinforced and made more pervasive in impact by the decontextualization of initial and subsequent traumas. The result is a

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<sup>27</sup> Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 4. Quoted by Patrick Miller, “Heaven’s Prisoners,” in *Lament: Reclaiming Practices in Pulpit, Pew, and Public Square*, 2005, 17.

<sup>28</sup> Dorothee Sölle, *Suffering*, (Translated by Everett Kalin) (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975), 71.

<sup>29</sup> Barbara Holmes, *Joy Unspeakable: Contemplative Practices of the Black Church*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004), 72.

deep-structured grief; a seemingly unfathomable sense of loss that settles in. It “seeps into one’s body and leaks into every cell and every minute of one’s life.” Joh declares, further: “It is the kind of grief that hovers at the edge of everything you see, of the bodily movements of everydayness in which feelings are filtered through an extremely heavy fog of grief.” This disposition, she says, “is unconsciously passed on to the next generation.”<sup>30</sup> As I proceed it will be shown that as unnerving as Professor Joh’s characterization is, the situation of African Americans is possibly far worse.

The dynamics of child rearing is central to the process of culture formation. Indeed, DeGruy reminds us that by means of beliefs and actions children receive most of their attitudes, life skills and approaches to life by the time they are five or six years old.<sup>31</sup> Our sense of the tragic character of the situation she describes is heightened when we recall that the early years of a person’s life is the period when neural plasticity is greatest. As such, it is most susceptible to the way experiences activate neural firings and sculpt emerging synaptic connections. Siegel informs us: “This is how experience changes the structure of the brain itself .... As we grow, then, an intricate weaving of the genetic, chance, and experiential input into the brain shapes what we call our ‘personality,’ with all its habits, likes, dislikes, and patterns of response.”<sup>32</sup> Therefore, with the legacy of trauma (and associated grief) passed down through our immediate relations and the wider community,<sup>33</sup> patterns of self-understanding and behavior emerge. Among the consequences of the generational trauma DeGruy mentions are vacant esteem, despair, ever present anger, racist socialization and a paralysis that makes one unable to move beyond fears and doubts, thus limiting one’s choices.<sup>34</sup>

Further awareness of the extent of the challenge before us is provided when we take into account the findings of more recent neurobiological research which points our attention to what Professor Bill Sullivan of Indiana University School of Medicine classifies as “transgenerational epigenetic inheritance.”<sup>35</sup> Here, “epigenetic” meaning “beyond the gene” refers to the ways

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<sup>30</sup> Wonhee Anne Joh, “A Postcolonial Spectrality of the Cross.” Found in *Concilium - International Journal of Theology*, 2013/3, 41-50.

<sup>31</sup> Joy DeGruy, *Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome*, 118.

<sup>32</sup> Daniel Siegel, *Mindsight*, 41.

<sup>33</sup> Siegel, 125-142.

<sup>34</sup> Siegel, 122, 125, 130, 135, 143, 148, 160, 165, 193.

<sup>35</sup> Bill Sullivan, *Pleased to Meet Me: Genes, , Germs, and the Curious Forces That Make Us Who We Are*, (Washington, DC, National Geographic Partners LLC, 2019), 158.

effects of trauma endure long after the immediate threat is gone and is transmitted to future generations not just through culture but the alteration of gene function. Importantly, “epigenetics emphasizes the intimate interaction between our genes and our environment, and reveals why our genes are not necessarily destiny.”<sup>36</sup>

### *Transgenerational Epigenetic Inheritance*

The best explication of this phenomenon I’ve encountered is that by Rachel Yehuda<sup>37</sup> whose journey in this area began by studying the high rates of PTSD among Holocaust survivors in her childhood Jewish community in Cleveland, Ohio. This investigation soon expanded to engage the adult children of survivors who were discovered to be more likely than others in their demographic to have mood and anxiety disorders, as well as PTSD. Some reading this essay might readily identify with the experience of one of these persons as is described in Professor Yehuda’s July 2022 article.<sup>38</sup> In the article she also identifies stages of her ongoing research and important influences on the process through which the role of the stress hormone cortisol and the process called methylation<sup>39</sup> were highlighted. Like Vietnam veterans studied by neuroscientists John

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Epigenetics explores the switches that turn gene expressions on and off and reflects the recent (1990s) realization by scientists that the output of our genes is sensitive to factors not written directly into our genetic code.

<sup>36</sup> Sullivan, *Pleased to Meet Me*, 29.

<sup>37</sup> Dr. Rachel Yehuda is professor of psychiatry and neuroscience and director of the Center for Psychedelic Psychotherapy and Trauma Research at the Icahn School of Medicine at Mount Sinai. She is also director of mental health at the James J. Peters Veteran Affairs Medical Center.

<sup>38</sup> “When he came in for an interview, Joseph didn’t look like a casualty of anything. A handsome and wealthy investment banker in an Armani suit, he could’ve stepped off the pages of a magazine. But Joseph lived each day with a vague sense that something terrible was going to happen and that he might need to flee or fight for his life. He’d been preparing for the worst since his early 20s, keeping cash and jewelry at hand and becoming proficient in boxing and martial arts. Lately he was tormented by panic attacks and nightmares of persecution, possibly triggered by reports of ethnic cleansing in Bosnia .... We ended up talking to many people like Joseph: adult children of Holocaust survivors who suffered from anxiety, grief, guilt, dysfunctional relationships and intrusions of Holocaust-related imagery.” See “Trauma in the Family Tree.” *Scientific American*, volume 327 #1, July 2022, 52-55.

<sup>39</sup> A process by which, in the presence of specific enzymes, methyl groups attach to key sites on a strand of DNA and proteins known as chromatin. By occupying these sites like roadblocks on a highway, methyl groups can alter transcription, a basic step in gene expression where a piece of RNA is made from a DNA template. Increased methylation generally impedes RNA transcription, whereas less methylation enhances transcription. These changes are enduring in

Mason, Earl Giller and Thomas Kosten in the 1980s, Yehuda and her team discovered that many of these offspring had low cortisol levels as had been observed in their parents with PTSD. With further research on Vietnam veterans in the 1990s, it was discovered that these veterans were more likely to develop PTSD if they had suffered abuse as children. While I acquired the very-difficult-to-understand technical report “Holocaust Exposure Induced Intergenerational Effects on FKBP5 Methylation” by Yehuda and colleagues,<sup>40</sup> it is Bill Sullivan’s multifaceted work *Pleased to Meet Me* that has provided a broad framework for exploring the epigenetics of this scenario. Thus, I point attention to his discussion of the link between childhood trauma and DNA methylation at a gene called NR3C1 with changes occurring at genes associated with brain function or stress management. Sullivan proceeds to indicate that the studies “reveal why many abused and neglected children can’t ‘get over it,’ as outsiders sometimes naively wonder.”<sup>41</sup> Yehuda adds to our awareness with the reminder in her article that in intense childhood adversity the “freeze” reaction is dominant because a child usually cannot fight or flee. This child is like Daniel Goleman’s “helpless person” who feels their life in danger and they can do nothing to escape it. In that moment brain change begins and an important outcome is low cortisol and the heightened possibility of future PTSD.<sup>42</sup> Interestingly, we also learn from Sullivan that Douglas Williamson of Duke University found that adolescents growing up in homes with lower socioeconomic status also had DNA methylation at the gene SLC6A4.<sup>43</sup>

Important clues on cortisol’s regulatory role emerged from research carried out in 1984 by Allan Munck and other researchers at the Geisel School of Medicine at Dartmouth College. Yehuda’s research was influenced by their insight that in a context of acute trauma, cortisol may paradoxically have a protective effect, shutting down the release of stress hormones -including itself. By so doing, it reduces potential damage stress hormones have on bodily organs and the

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that they survive normal cell division and require specific enzymes for their removal. See “Trauma in the Family” in *Scientific American*, 54.

<sup>40</sup> Located in *Biological Psychiatry*, 12 Aug 2015, 80(5):372-380.

<sup>41</sup> Bill Sullivan, *Pleased to Meet Me*, 132-3.

<sup>42</sup> “Trauma in the Family Tree.” *Scientific American*, volume 327 #1, July 2022, 53. People who had been raped or had been in auto accidents were also studied and it was found that those with lower cortisol levels were more likely to develop PTSD after the attack or accident. See

<sup>43</sup> Bill Sullivan, *Pleased to Meet Me*, 133.

brain. Yehuda's team's 2002 discovery of very low cortisol in the 9/11 babies<sup>44</sup> led to the correction of conclusions drawn from the earlier investigations in Cleveland. It made them realize that the health problems observed in the children of Holocaust survivors were not simply the result of "the stressful, bereaved atmosphere in their childhood homes." Encouraged by this finding, the Cleveland study was redone to figure out if the sex of the parent mattered. Thus, while in 2013 Brian Dias and Kerry Ressler of Emory University School of Medicine had experimented on mice and identified an intergenerational epigenetic pathway that ran through sperm,<sup>45</sup> Yehuda's investigation established that those whose mother (or both parents) had PTSD tended to exhibit lower cortisol levels and showed evidence of more sensitive glucocorticoid receptors.<sup>46</sup> In contrast, those whose fathers, but not mothers, had PTSD showed the opposite effect. Further studies, the last being in 2020 that worked with a substantially larger sample than the Holocaust offspring, suggested that independent of whether mothers had PTSD or not trauma may have affected their eggs decades before her children were conceived, even when she was a child.<sup>47</sup> Thus, while Yehuda holds that parental behavior is the most apparent route for trauma experienced by their offspring the prenatal uterine environment also played an important role.

Imagine then, the compounding situation in which children born with higher than normal vulnerability to PTSD spend their earliest, most impressionable years in households led by holocaust-influenced PTSD inflicted parents who are very likely exhibiting what DeGruy described as an acute anticipation of danger around every corner and the terrible thing that could

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<sup>44</sup> See "Trauma in the Family Tree," *Scientific American*, 54. In the online representation with the title "How Parents' Trauma Leaves Biological Traces in Children" Yehuda mentions that her trauma research team quickly trained health professionals to evaluate and, if needed, treat the women. She says "We monitored them through their pregnancies and beyond. When the babies were born, they were smaller than usual—the first sign that the trauma of the World Trade Center attack had reached the womb. Nine months later we examined 38 women and their infants when they came in for a wellness visit. Psychological evaluations revealed that many of the mothers had developed PTSD. And those with PTSD had unusually low levels of the stress-related hormone cortisol, a feature that researchers were coming to associate with the disorder." See <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/how-parents-trauma-leaves-biological-traces-in-children/>.

<sup>45</sup> Bill Sullivan, *Pleased to Meet Me*, 157-9.

<sup>46</sup> Glucocorticoid receptors are proteins that regulate genes which control the development, metabolism, and immune response of cells. It is to these receptors that cortisol binds to exert its diverse influences.

<sup>47</sup> Rachel Yehuda, "Trauma in the Family," *Scientific American*, 54.

overtake them at any moment become the dominant posture in life and where specific behavioral traits that include an exaggerated startle response, irritability or outbursts of anger, difficulty concentrating, difficulty falling or staying asleep, a sense of foreshortened future, feeling of detachment or estrangement from others are very evident. Underlying all this may well be, as Wonhee Anne Joh has described, deep-structured grief that hovers on the edge of everything and through which everything is filtered. Indeed, a seemingly unfathomable sense of loss that has settled in and has seeped into these parents' bodies and leaked into every cell and into every minute of their lives.<sup>48</sup> Thus, after taking into account the potential mitigation that results from genetic adaptation that resets the cortisol "thermostat" to a lower level and the other in which the enzyme known as 11-beta-hydroxysteroid dehydrogenase type 2 (11 $\beta$ -HSD2) appeared to protect the offspring of Holocaust survivors from the toxicity of circulating maternal cortisol,<sup>49</sup> we cannot avoid the distressing legacy that has been bequeathed to successive generations of offspring. Affected by adrenaline levels constantly at a high level, the impact of any new trauma will become seared into susceptible brains that are not just in heads but are directly connected to the complex networks of nerves throughout bodies that relay data upward. Imagine then, flashbacks, nightmares, irritability, paranoia, etc., and also heightened susceptibility to PTSD.

Yehuda clearly wishes to encourage hope in those who are exposed to her findings. Her main point in the discussion of 11 $\beta$ -HSD2 is that "offspring are not always passive recipients of their parents' scars."<sup>50</sup> She does not want us to ignore evidence for resilience in succeeding

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<sup>48</sup> Many were exposed to the turbulence of such settings through Art Spiegelman's serialized work titled *Maus*. This multi-genre project won the Pulitzer Prize in 1992.

<sup>49</sup> According to Yehuda, Holocaust survivors had lower levels of the enzyme than those who hadn't lived through the Holocaust, with this being most pronounced in those who were the youngest during World War II when they very likely experienced long periods of malnourishment. Under conditions of food deprivation, the body can lower levels of 11 $\beta$ -HSD2 to increase metabolic fuel in the interest of promoting survival. In adults, the enzyme level will return to what it was when there is no more starvation, but in children, the level may remain low. Most significant for the present focus is discovery that among her test subjects in Cleveland, levels of 11 $\beta$ -HSD2 were higher in the children whose mothers were Holocaust survivors than in the control group.

Active maternal cortisol is converted to an inactive form, creating a chemical shield in the placenta that protects the fetus from the hormone's harmful effects.

See Yehuda, "Trauma in the Family Tree," *Scientific American*, 55.

<sup>50</sup> Yehuda, "Trauma in the Family Tree," 54.

generations that is attributable to the adaptations that are identified. She does acknowledge that there is no guarantee that the emergent quality she notices will persist or that it might not result in the emergence of new vulnerabilities. There is also the recognition that much depends on the environment encountered by those who carry potentially epigenetic adaptations.<sup>51</sup> Yet, she points to evidence of veterans with PTSD benefitting from cognitive-behavioral psychotherapy. And it is influenced by this spirit of optimism that I proceed further in this essay.

### *Trauma, Destructive Habits, and Extreme Reactions*

Against the background of Yehuda's word of hope, I remind the reader that the trauma-generating conditions for African Americans has persisted for 400 years, with the most recent descendants of those who first experienced the Black Holocaust still struggling for liberation and belonging in the midst of the descendants of their first traumatizers. And they pursue these while trapped in a system of white supremacy constructed on their backs and intended to keep them subjugated. It is to this matter that I return with strengthened awareness of the complexity of the phenomenon being addressed. I do so with the worry that, having operated with the consequences of long-established and constantly repeated trauma in personal, interpersonal and communal life, too many of us are prone to operate in ways that feed the process to which DeGruy refers by which our disfigurements are normalized and eventually becomes culture. Unfortunately, oftentimes when disfiguring practices and attitudes become "culture," many whose lives are beset by them feel obliged to justify and even glamorize them rather than pursue critical understanding that opens the path to individual and communal healing.

So, on one hand, I can speak with pride about the care, talent, hospitality and ambition of the people who inhabit the island in which I grew up (Jamaica, WI). On the other hand, it is also a place where aggression and harshness are well-practiced traits, cantankerous people are often at loggerheads, suspicion is in the background of many interactions and often collides with romanticized acts of deception, and the preoccupation with not being disrespected along with an inclination to revenge often leads to extreme violence. The outcomes of these dynamics are evident in the most intimate settings as-well-as wider socio-cultural spheres. And quite glibly, many Jamaicans excuse these behaviors with the claim that the majority Black population are the

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<sup>51</sup> Yehuda, 55.

offspring of the “baddest” and most rebellious slaves who were often shipped to Jamaica from the US and elsewhere to be “broken,” or we malign the West African folktale hero Anansi by exalting his characterization as trickster.

Here I’m grateful to bell hooks who in her recommendations for self-recovery among African American women identifies some factors that reflect similarities between the Jamaican and African American situations. With interesting examples, she encourages Black women in the US to reject the inclination toward deception and dissimulation that are fundamental to a culture of domination and often viewed as necessary for survival within the colonizing process. The practice of “harsh critique,” she points out, is often used to assault, humiliate, shame, and put people in their place. There is the lamentation: “we hold onto these strategies even when they are not connected to our survival and undermine our well-being.” hooks points out that in making “harsh critique” some fall back on the expression “just being honest,” and this declarations might indeed contain some “truth.” However, they do not contribute to the liberating truth-telling she considers fundamental to the self-recovery process she promotes.<sup>52</sup> With the conviction that the features just described apply to both men and women, I note that hooks’ emphasis on truth-telling obligated her to also speak directly about African American men. In *The Will to Change* she lamented that reformist feminists have misrepresented their situation. “Feminist writing did not tell us about the deep misery of men. It did not tell us the terrible terror that gnaws at the soul when we cannot love. Women who envied men their hardheartedness were not about to tell us the depth of male suffering.”<sup>53</sup> The ongoing exploration of trauma and its affects in this essay should contribute depth to our understanding of the suffering of Black men and help explain how the destructive behavior pattern we easily associate with patriarchy is one stream of consequence that flows from a common source shared with the very women who are sometimes their victims.

Speaking again of the situation in Jamaica, I’ve often said that when many in that context announce that they are going to be “brutally honest,” one should beat a hasty retreat because the intention is to be more brutal than honest. In the case of parents, hooks suggests that often “harsh critique” is one means of “proving” themselves good parents that are beyond reproach.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> bell hooks, *Daughters of the Yam – Black Women and Self-Recovery*, (Boston, MA: South End Press, 1993), 19-34.

<sup>53</sup> bell hooks, *The Will to Change: Men, Masculinity, and Love*, (New York: Washington Square Press, 2004), 4.

<sup>54</sup> bell hooks, *Sisters of the Yam.*, 35.



I, and many of my generation of Jamaicans, were not only subject to harsh critique. We were subject to brutal expressions of corporal punishment to keep us in line through fear. Being a teacher's child added the dangerous layer of expectation to be viewed as an exemplar of the disciplined-virtuous behavior being promoted to other youngsters and modeled for the wider community.

I now ask my equally caring, talented, hospitable and ambitious African American siblings to consider which aspects of our "culture" we should be moving with expedition to correct and reorient? Informed by our increasing awareness of trauma and its consequences, should we view in a different way the harshness, aggression, suspicion and deception that we easily excuse as means of survival, even as they undermine the goodwill and cooperation required for our own progress? While we rightfully protest the intended terror of police brutality and the system of mass incarceration, should we pay much more attention to the frightening violence we direct toward each other at an alarmingly high rate? Might it be that too many of us are susceptible to ensnarement by unbridled consumerism because it reflects not only our socialized affinity to the nation's normative center but also because it serves as sedation for the inner turbulence that results from false and conflicted consciousness, undergirded by distorted consciousness? In other words, shopping and the accumulation of "stuff" may well be analogous to comfort food. So too might a variety of other addicting sedations (from coke, to sweet things, to worship) and dysfunctional behavior patterns that plague personal and social performance in the African American community. Interestingly, hooks identifies food addiction and compulsive shopping as not-so-obvious addictions that affect Black women.<sup>55</sup>

The recognition that these attitudes and activities probably have to do with how Black brains have been afflicted by transgenerational and current trauma opens the way for further insight into some of the responses many Black persons make when confronted by the police who are now the most obvious representatives of the violence of white supremacy. Actually, I'm fairly confident that, given the affliction of Post Traumatic *Slavery* Disorder, we are highly susceptible to what psychologist Daniel Goleman termed amygdala hijacking which results in what I term "panic brain." Simply put, the amygdala is the part of the brain designed to detect and produce the quick responses of fight, flight or freeze to threatening situations. As a result of

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<sup>55</sup> hooks, 71.

a history of bombardment by the chemical reactions that result from the dynamics Yehuda and Sullivan describe, this organ becomes hypersensitive and robustly reactive to threatening stimuli, guided by its stored memory of events and associations.<sup>56</sup> Indeed, Siegel reminds us that evolution appears to have been far more interested in keeping humans alive than in making us happy or inclining us to irenic relations. Overall, negative emotions trump positive ones and weigh more heavily in our evaluation of people and situations – fear conditioning reflect primitive qualities of the amygdala that have been conserved by evolution – “the amygdala is quick to learn and slow to forget. Learned fears are tenacious and tend to return when we are under stress.”<sup>57</sup> Therefore, when one recalls the list of symptoms Dr. DeGruy associates with Post Traumatic *Slavery* Disorder, it is easily appreciated how one becomes predisposed to reactions that can be disproportionate to the present stimulus or are strategically unhelpful as the amygdala preempts the more deliberate assessments of our neocortex.

Imagine then, a community in which this complex of features is pervasive and there are few means of collective expression or even adequate understanding of their character, and internal pressure builds as people act and react out of the dysfunction they reflect. Thus, newly self-inflicted injury is added to old sores. Imagine further, the continuous compounding of this situation that takes place through the intimidating sense that our community is hemmed in by the dominant order that has continuously operated to humiliate, limit access and blight opportunities. Imagine, in addition, the signs of our relative inferiority that are informed by standards set by this very oppressive order increase because of rapidly growing disparity in income and more so wealth and social benefits.<sup>58</sup> How devastating it must be for the Black psyche that despite the

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<sup>56</sup> See the succinct characterization in Daniel Goleman, *Emotional Intelligence—Why it can Matter More than IQ (10<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Edition)*, (New York: Bantam Books, 2006), Appendix C, 297-300.

<sup>57</sup> Louis Cozolino, *The Neuroscience of Human Relationships: Attachment and the Developing Social Brain*, (New York, NY: W.W. Norton & Co, 2006), 318.

We don’t even have to be conscious of a stimulus, either in the environment or within them, in order for it to become a conditioned cue for fear. The amygdala is always paying attention to what’s happening around us, about which we’re completely oblivious, guiding our responses. It teaches us to fear without us even being aware of what is happening.

<sup>58</sup> It is very telling that the 100 richest Americans control more wealth than the entire Black population of approximately 47 million, and the median Black family owns just 2 percent of the wealth owned by the median White family. Latino families own 4 percent of the wealth owned by White families. The proportion of Black families with zero or negative wealth rose by 8.5 percent to 37 percent between 1983 and 2016. By contrast, even though Latino families in this

much-glamorized increase of 171% in overall purchasing power since 2001 to 1.6 trillion dollars in 2021 the average African American is generally closer than Euro Americans and Latino/a Americans to the economic edge and in many cases one minor economic setback away from disaster.<sup>59</sup> Along with these features, factor in explicit everyday stressors and subtler forms of violation like micro-aggressions<sup>60</sup> and lack of regard that are persistent features of contemporary life.

With these elements in mind, it should not be difficult to see how persistent pain and chronic insecurity can stoke anger and anger exacerbate “panic brain,” which, among other affects, undermines the brain’s executive functioning which are the higher-level cognitive skills that enables us to plan and meet goals, focus, remember instructions, exercise self-control etc. Equally frightening is the contemplation of what is likely when a person experiencing any one or a combination of these states and who carries the ascription menacing-dangerous alien is confronted by traumatized policemen set on edge by “dirty pain” and whose anxiety is comingled with a hyperinflated sense of power and importance engendered by white supremacy. In addition – and tragically – it so happens that the latter possesses a gun with authority to use if there is the slightest feeling of threat.

With this proposal in mind, I have found Goleman’s suggestions, along with those of Daniel Siegel regarding the treatment of persons with Post Traumatic *Stress* Disorder, very relevant to what I imagine should occur as part of the process of intentional self-margination in the interest of healing and transformation. And given my obvious respect for the work being done by Rachel Yehuda and Bill Sullivan, they serve as examples to support my conviction that

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predicament is more than twice as high as the rate of Whites, their proportion declined by 19 percent over 30 years.

<sup>59</sup> We hear a lot about the ways the “power” of the purchasing power of the African American community is putting pressure on producers of commodities to cater to our needs. And I’m sure there are those who would be delighted to point my attention to Black owned businesses that owe their emergence or expansion to the growth in this purchasing power. However, the lamentable fact is that increased access to financial resources has primarily served to make us vastly more aggressive as consumers than as investors and builders of lasting businesses.

See, for example <https://www.nielsen.com/us/en/insights/article/2018/black-impact-consumer-categories-where-african-americans-move-markets/>.

<sup>60</sup> Menakem, *My Grandmother’s Hands*, 75. He defines this phenomenon as “the small but persistent and pervasive ways in which white people deliberately (though often unconscious) express disdain for Black bodies.”

intentional self-margination should not involve the discounting of findings from the wealth of exploration that has been carried out by scholars and practitioners from various communities on concerns that affect the African American community directly and indirectly. Black scholars and practitioners should critically engage available insights from any credible sphere in light of our own understandings of the needs of the African American community. DeGruy's writings and workshops have contributed much to the general awareness of Post Traumatic *Slavery* Disorder and Menakem is doing great work to expand its explanatory power, popularize associated concepts and structure a therapeutic framework. My strong desire is to see the development of a sustainable process that might be applied in wider group settings. As we are being challenged to recognize at Brite Divinity School, these settings need to include academic institutions that seek to increase the number of Black people among their students, staff and faculty. That said, I'm convinced that it is in the context of Black churches, established with Black flourishing as a priority and where the "care of Black souls" and the generation of nurturing community are fundamental to the *raison d'être*, that the most sustained pursuit of these concerns can most beneficially occur. Recognizing education and training as its primary purpose, the Divinity School or Seminary that has Black flourishing as a concern would embrace the responsibility to prepare leaders for congregations and wider community settings who can construct frameworks, facilitate process and pursue collaborations that address the kind of issues we've been addressing.

## II

### **Toward a Sustained Healing Process**

I suggest that, as the character of Post Traumatic *Slavery* Disorder was portrayed with the help of insights from Post Traumatic *Stress* Disorder, so too might proposals for healing emerge from that framework. Supported by hooks, I insist that the road to healing begins with a recognition of the need to change, the will to change, and the discipline to pursue change.

#### *Exploring the Situation at a Deeper Level*

I find insights from Goleman to be a helpful starting place. Thus, with the symptoms DeGruy associates with Post Traumatic *Slavery* Disorder in mind, intentional self-margination

can be understood as the creation of a “dedicated” space where, through honest and well-informed interaction, African Americans come to appreciate that the jumpiness, hyper-vigilance, panics and other turbulences they experience are to be expected given their and their community’s history and/or the culture of expectation in which they are being nurtured.<sup>61</sup> Then, with the help of persons from various therapeutic and spiritually nurturing disciplines, we need to abandon the customary posturing adopted by some to give the impression that we are tough and learn ways to “calm the too-fearful, too easily triggered emotional circuits enough to allow relearning and reorientation.”<sup>62</sup>

In his discussion on relearning and recovery from trauma by individuals Goleman acknowledges the benefit of medication and Sullivan informs us that, although epigenetics is a new field of study, the FDA has already approved several epigenetic drugs.<sup>63</sup> I advocate the careful use of medication as sometimes necessary to open the way for other therapies, even a I support Goleman’s reminder that they have limitations. He proceeds to mention methods of relaxation that can counter edginess and nervousness and engender psychological calm and “opens a window for helping the brutalized emotional circuitry rediscover that life is not a threat and for giving back the sense of security they had in their lives before the trauma happened.”<sup>64</sup> Reminding us that the whole body is involved in the process of healing, Menakem also issues the warning that the calming process can become ensnared by the disengaging-dissociative disposition to which trauma drives many. As such, whatever are the means employed, they should be engaged with the recognition that depending on the circumstance both calming and mobilization are needed. Thus, a critical aspect of facilitation on the margins would be helping persons learn how to stay with and listen to their whole bodies and discern what is needed for different moments or periods.<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> Daniel Goleman, *Emotional Intelligence*, 210.

<sup>62</sup> Goleman, 210.

<sup>63</sup> Sullivan informs us that although epigenetics is a new field of study, the FDA has already approved several epigenetic drugs to treat various illnesses. See *Pleased to Meet Me*, 276.

<sup>64</sup> Daniel Goleman, *Emotional Intelligence*, 211.

<sup>65</sup> Resmaa Menakem, *My Grandmother’s Hands*, 34.

*Call it Mindsight, Mindfulness, or Mindful Awareness*

On the matter of whole-body engagement toward relearning and reorientation, it is Siegel's work *Mindsight* that I've found most helpful as he explicates the dynamics of "integration," utilizing the acronym FACES which stands for flexible, adaptive, coherent, energized, and stable. Imagining the FACES flow as a river, he suggests that without integrating movement the traumatized mind will tend to one or other boundary: chaos or rigidity.<sup>66</sup> Embracing Siegel's definition of mind as "a relational and embodied process that regulates the flow of energy and information,"<sup>67</sup> mindsight is the skill/discipline through which one pushes beyond the "reactive emotional loops" in which many of us are caught up. In doing so, we become able to stay with and listen to the whole body, discerning its needs and shaping energy and information flows to address them in their interconnection. Thus, mindsight is described as a seventh sense. Beyond the five senses that allow us to perceive the external world is a sixth that "allows us to perceive our internal bodily states;" the seventh "allows us to see and shape the inner workings of our own minds."<sup>68</sup>

The book *Mindsight* contains arresting portrayals of therapeutic engagement intended to facilitate the shift just alluded to through the method called "interpersonal neurobiology." The reader's appreciation for the process of "integration" should be assisted by one of a number of examples of neurological dis-integration he provides. This is his therapeutic engagement with Anne, a medical doctor. She came to Siegel complaining of heart palpitations, a feeling of emptiness, and distance from family. In the process of engagement, Siegel learnt of a childhood characterized by the traumatic loss of her mother at a very young age, the sense of being abandoned by her father because of his remarriage, and being humiliated by her stepmother. Anne remembered a fateful day when, after a shaming confrontation with her stepmother she told herself that she would never feel again. Little did she realize that her mind would orchestrate to defend her against that which made her feel abused and rejected by shutting off her awareness of her feelings.<sup>69</sup> This is an expression of dissociation or what some refer to as "splitting," whereby active memories of the disturbing past are kept at bay. Usually occurring without

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<sup>66</sup> Daniel Siegel, *Mindsight*, 69-71.

<sup>67</sup> Siegel, 52-54.

<sup>68</sup> Siegel., ix-xi.

<sup>69</sup> Siegel, 120-123.

conscious awareness, one adopts the posture of hiding from oneself, and Bessel Van der Kolk provides striking examples of how extreme this can be in some persons.<sup>70</sup> I highlight the recognition that by locking-out awareness of that perceived as threatening one becomes locked-in and fixed in the state I call “ever-threatened,” which persists even when one is in a situation that is not in the least threatening. “Better be safe than sorry,” the survivalist brain screams! And one expression of inordinate self-protection is “emotional numbness, a sense of being cut off from life or from concern about the feelings of others. Those close to such people may experience this indifference as a lack of empathy.”<sup>71</sup> All this does not mean that such people are unable to pursue causes that have implications for the welfare of others. It means that, in the final analysis, it is the way the concerns of others resonate with the personal pain which is ones overriding motivation for action.

For Anne, dissociation may well have involved some degree of depersonalization (feeling like one’s always watching oneself) and derealization (things and people around seem unreal – like a dreamworld or operating in a haze). We learn that she was shutting down the channels by which primal feelings/emotions in her body that register reactions to threatening situations and would be transmitted to the subcortical region of her brain for processing and evaluation in regard to meaning would move into conscious address in the prefrontal cortex. What resulted was not simply that Anne’s awareness of the markers of primary emotions reflected in her body (heart rate, pulse rate, breathing, stomach etc.) was dampened. She was cutting herself off from the processes of the limbic system which attributes meanings to feelings/emotions, even the activities of the area of the middle prefrontal cortex which mediates the pain of social rejection as much as pain from bodily injury.<sup>72</sup>

It so happens that, as a result of denying herself contact with the threatening affects of her subcortical region,<sup>73</sup> Anne would lose awareness of the outcomes of the processes of the anterior cingulate cortex that regulates focus of attention and so plays a key role in the resonance

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<sup>70</sup> Bessel Van der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score – Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma*, (New York: Penguin Books, 2015), 134.

<sup>71</sup> Daniel Goleman, *Emotional Intelligence*, 206.

<sup>72</sup> For the full description, see Siegel, *Mindsight*, 120-144.

<sup>73</sup> Subcortical structures are located deep within the brain and are enclosed by the cerebral cortex. Among other structures, it includes amygdala, hippocampus, thalamus, hypothalamus. They are involved in activities such as event memory, emotion, hormone production, and act as information hubs to the nervous system.

circuitry of the brain by which we develop meaningful connection with others. It is no wonder that Anne had physical symptoms that she could not make sense of, that despite success as a physician she felt empty, and that she had little connection with her family. According to Siegel Anne had become too well insulated/protected for her own good, and Van der Kolk identifies more extreme consequences for others who experience such acute insulation from their feelings that they have severely diminished capacity to sense what's occurring in their bodies. Interestingly, Van der Kolk suggests that this deficiency actually contributes to lack of self-protection by some victims of abuse – this making them susceptible to revictimization.<sup>74</sup>

I invite the reader to explore the fuller description of therapeutic processes intended to guide Anne toward psychosomatic integration and also the others contained therein. Important to my purposes in this essay is appreciation that for Siegel the path to integration begins with the development of what he calls mindsight/mindfulness/mindful awareness. Siegel asserts that, at root, this process of focusing attention is “a biological process that promotes health – a form of brain hygiene – not a religion.” While it might be utilized in religious settings, as I encourage, “learning the skill of mindful awareness is simply a way of cultivating ... the integration of consciousness.”<sup>75</sup> The intention is to focus on the operations of the brain-mind in each present moment, in its extended relation with the rest of the body, and orient one's self to a healthier life by developing three types of integration. 1) Vertical integration involves attunement between cortical and subcortical regions; 2) Horizontal integration involves the right and left hemispheres of the brain; 3) Interpersonal integration involves the way one perceives self in relation to the Other.<sup>76</sup> Van Der Kolk characterizes this multidimensional process appealingly with the expression “befriending the body.” He declares: “Trauma victims cannot recover until they become familiar with and befriend the sensations in their bodies. Being frightened means that you live in a body that is always on guard. Angry people live in angry bodies.”<sup>77</sup> The dynamics of mindsight progressively overcomes the dissociation intended to shield one from the frightening impacts of an angry body by reducing conscious awareness of traumatising events

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<sup>74</sup> Van Der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score*, 101.

<sup>75</sup> Siegel, *Mindsight*, 83.

<sup>76</sup> Siegel, 72, 116.

<sup>77</sup> Van Der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score*, 102.



with associated emotions. Thus, one is progressively less susceptible to being caught up in and overwhelmed by “reactive emotional loops.”<sup>78</sup>

A mind facilitated toward lessening defensiveness opens the way for increasingly intimate connection with the inner sensory world, with its disfigurements and turmoil, and one is able to sustain awareness of shifts and changes that are linked to the arousal system. The nurture of management practices opens the way for increasing efficiency at consciously harnessing the ability of the middle prefrontal cortex to inhibit and modulate the firing of the fear-creating amygdala. Thus, we progressively fashion a healthy climate for the wider network of emotions and processes that constitute the limbic system.<sup>79</sup> An increasingly healthy mind-brain climate enables more openness to new experiences that trigger neurons to fire and wire together, thus generating neurogenesis that encodes new memories which reconfigure the terrain of our brains and create opportunities for ongoing integration and re-storying.

In considering relevance to African Americans, I now point out a crucial limitation of Goleman’s and Siegel’s proposals, and even Van Der Kolk’s to a slightly lesser extent: they do not address directly the communal trauma DeGruy and Menakem describe that is compounded by the ongoing sense of being hemmed in by the traumatizer. Contemporary African Americans do not have “lives before the trauma happened” and life at present is often characterized by real, constant threat. And an important way in which my approach to the issues at hand departs from all five is that my vision of the most beneficial healing process for African Americans involves the intentional nurturing of larger group processes to undergird and frame the therapeutic engagements with the individuals they privilege.<sup>80</sup> It is in anticipation of the upcoming discussion of the vital role the Black church should play in fostering a framework for larger group processes to address trauma and its consequences and to identify the mechanisms and personnel for both group and individual engagements that I now list from Siegel’s, Goleman’s and Van Der Kolk’s explorations some important elements of the healing process being promoted.

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<sup>78</sup> Siegel, *Mindsight*, ix-x.

<sup>79</sup> Siegel, 28.

<sup>80</sup> Menakem does say much about Black bodies connecting with each other. However, this follows the healing work with individuals.

- The vigorous pursuit of truth telling which involves frank admissions about the health of the Black community at multiple levels, including the deep-structured impact of transgenerational trauma.
- Appreciate the need for therapeutic intervention by adequately trained person who are attuned to the needs of the Black community and the encouragement of more Black persons to be pursue such preparation.
- With appropriate guidance, orient persons to pursue whole body awareness which involves sustained and well-managed immersion in body sensation.
- Nurture the ability to sustain moment-by-moment awareness and learning self-soothing practices to address likely reactivity.
- Foster in persons the ability to identify and articulate what the body is feeling and better manage the ways corrosive emotions manifest in outward performance.
- Recognize that limbic system therapy is central to the integration required to counter the psychic shattering that is a debilitating feature of Black life in the US and elsewhere.
- Pay attention to all dimensions of integration that are required for comprehensive healing.
- Intentionally pursue synaptic exercises to stimulate neuronal activism and reinforce synaptic linkages that progressively reorient the terrain of shattered brains.
- Change the associations embedded in neural networks.
- Face the tragic element at the heart of life, learning how to express and accept grief.
- Allow the integrations involved in the process of befriending the body to expand into understanding of the connection between self-care and care for the Other.
- Even as a strengthened sense of agency is pursued by individuals, resist the narcissistic individualism on the rise in a culture of domination and nurture healthy communities of resistance.
- Recognize that the responsibility to pursue excellence does not magically emerge at a point when we can claim to be healed. Instead, it results from dogged, disciplined pursuits while on the painful journey to health. Indeed, at points along the way we will only be able to take the next step because we have held our demons at bay not because they have been exorcised.

### *Healing Wisdom from “Other” Places*

As suggested before, important elements of the threat and anxiety that plague many African Americans arise from the faulty self-understanding that we as a community are favoured by the God of Exodus and Conquest. What results is unnecessary vulnerability as we pursue belonging and a constantly frustrated desire as we seek after the social and economic centre of our nation viewed as reflective of the blessing that fuels the American Dream. Thus, the very decision to develop a dedicated space through intentional self-margination could well be therapeutic in itself. At the same time, I am very mindful that this process, which directs us away from familiar locations, preoccupations, and valued associations will also probably excite deep-structured anxiety and generate new ones. Therefore, it is imperative that:

- The very process by which the value of intentional self-margination is promoted includes the introduction of appropriate group-oriented methods that nurture the communal mindfulness that enables sensitivity to both individual and collective symptoms of Post Traumatic *Slavery* Disorder.
- There is resistance to the temptation to ignore or vilify meditation, calming and body awareness practices from nonreligious, ancientAfrican, nonAfrican and nonChristian settings, and instead work carefully at appropriating them for our purposes within the African American community.
- We appreciate that, just as it was necessary to train persons in the methods of non-violence during the civil-rights struggle, it will require sustained training for members of the contemporary African American community to maintain ourselves and operate responsibly and productively in a variety of settings as we avail ourselves to processes that engender healing which will likely be slow and agonising.

With these aspirations in mind, the disposition I would like to see become pervasive in our intentional self-margination is one in which foundational values associated with the full life of Jesus the Christ, which includes emulation of his sustained relationship with the One he called Abba, is supplemented by practices I’ve observed in what some call Kemetic Yoga,<sup>81</sup> the

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<sup>81</sup> A growing number of people are claiming Kemet to be the proper name for ancient Egypt. While the word may refer to the black silt of the Nile and the fertility of that region, reference to the color of the population of the region is seen as more likely. Not only do artistic portrayals of

Chinese originated Falun Gong movement and judicious employment of other Body and Breath Practices such as those Menakem, Siegel and Van De Kolk identify throughout their texts.<sup>82</sup> By this, I mean:

- A broad network that promotes organized, corporate physical exercises/movements in tandem with meditative practices<sup>83</sup> and healthy diet as fundamental to spiritual health, whatever one believes religiously.
- The commitment to wrestle privately and publicly with the conceptual and practical significance of virtues like honesty, balance, order, compassion, morality, justice, harmony, self-discipline and tolerance that have some links to ancient Egyptian principles (personified in the goddess Ma'at) and which can help us live out what Christians often refer to as the Golden Rule.
- The absence of formal membership, which would leave persons free to maintain and/or develop other commitments that are more religious and satisfy their need for unique forms of worship.
- The willingness to allow insights gained from engagement of the broad framework of virtues, physical exercises/movement and meditative practices to influence all aspects of one's life, including one's religious beliefs.

### **III**

#### **The Black Church Is Not Exempt**

As a Black Christian, I would love to see Black churches take the lead in developing an appropriate framework in which the combination of elements just identified are pursued by

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this people leave the distinct impression that they were of dark hue, some show them in physical poses that we now identify with the discipline of yoga. This evidence, among other factors, has led some to the claim that yoga may have originated there. The philosophical component of contemporary expressions of Kemetic yoga seem to be grounded in the concept of Ma'at which referred to the 42 tenets of law and moral justice in ancient Egypt (Kemet). Ma'at is associated with certain fundamental virtues: truth, justice, balance and morality.

<sup>82</sup> See Menakem 35, 53, 63, 77, 93 etc., Siegel 90-97, 216-17, 134-141, Van Der Kolk 133, 209-10, 247, 268-278.

<sup>83</sup> This approach is partly influenced by the recognition that persons with agitated minds and shattered nervous systems will probably not do well at sitting meditation.

members and offered to others. Lee Butler is correct in his claim that African American religiosity has been a primary means of survival in these United States. He rightly indicates that this involves “our creative strength to confront, with great courage, the life-denying forces we face daily .... Learning how to thrive in an emotionally hostile world.”<sup>84</sup> My hope is that the spirituality that can lead to sociopolitical action designed “to bring God’s justice into the world” and move Black people from mere surviving to thriving, is not compromised. It is also that we do nurture “spirituality [that is] meditative” and results in authentic self-encounter that generates relational freedom.<sup>85</sup> Guided by an emerging sense of freedom we should be better able to live our lives with an ever-increasing awareness that the pursuit of personal well-being is inextricably tied to the ability to contribute to the well-being of other human beings and the whole cosmos.

James Cone takes us into a fascinating exploration of what church time represents for African Americans which should make one hopeful about its capacity to be both a place of healing and revolution of the types I promote. Cone suggests that the worship experience constitutes an “eschatological revolution” in which the worshipper’s identity changes. “They are no longer named by the world but named by the Spirit of Jesus .... The Holy Spirit’s presence with the people is a liberating experience.” He continues: “Black people who have been humiliated and oppressed by the structures of white society six days of the week, gather together each Sunday morning in order to experience a new definition of their humanity ....”<sup>86</sup> Cone gives examples of persons of low estate in the wider society who, within the church, are given opportunity to perform in ways that are understood to be noble and for which they receive acclaim.

Cone, it seems, understands these performances as signals of a transition to a different plane of existence. As such, he claims that “the transition from Saturday to Sunday ... is not just a chronological change from the seventh to the first day of the week. It is rather a rupture in time

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<sup>84</sup> Lee H. Butler Jr., *Liberating our Dignity, Saving our Souls: A Theory of African American Identity Formation*, (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2012), 106.

<sup>85</sup> Michael Miller, *Freedom in Resistance and Creative Transformation*, (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books/Rowman & Littlefield Publishing Group, 2013), 108.

<sup>86</sup> James Cone, “Sanctification and Liberation in Black Religious Tradition with Special Reference to Black Worship,” from the *Oxford Institute of Methodist Theological Studies (Sixth Institute)*, Lincoln College, July 18-28, 1977. See: <https://oxford-institute.org/1977-sixth-institute/> (10/1/2016), 176.

... which produces a radical transformation in the people's identity.”<sup>87</sup> This is an “eschatological revolution” in which sanctification and liberation come together.<sup>88</sup> In this special moment God’s ideal for humanity and the world, expected to be fully realized at the consummation of history, is already evident in the worship life of Black churches.

Other notable Black thinkers I’ve read like Barbara Holmes and James Evans, identify common aspects of the worship experience that seem relevant to our reflection on the dynamic Cone portrays. Holmes laments the fact that few seem to realize how closely Black church worship is following “the rules of engagement established by the contemporary ethos of constant entertainment.” Yet, she seems approving of the way clapping and dancing in many Black churches are reminiscent of the drumming and dancing that characterizes many African ritual settings.<sup>89</sup> Evans addresses this phenomenon as he engages W.E.B. DuBois’ and Zora Neale Hurston’s discussions on the place of “frenzy” in the stereotypical African American church of their times and is still evident today in some settings. Evans seems aligned to Cone’s inclination on this matter which is evidenced in the following declaration. “In the shout, the believer transcends the constructions and limitations that society imposes and is caught up in the Spirit. In this state the believer is both completely subject to a force outside of himself or herself, and, at the same time, completely free from custom and convention.”<sup>90</sup>

Yet, how ought all this to be evaluated when we consider that what is described are situations characterized by concentrated-sustained excitation of minds/spirits that are very likely traumatized and may well operate with dis-integrated de-personalization? Is it healing that is being fostered, or exacerbation?<sup>91</sup> Is Cone’s suggestion that “the authentic dimension of black people’s shouting is found in the joy they experience when the God’s Spirit visits their worship

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<sup>87</sup> Cone, “Sanctification and Liberation in Black Religious Tradition with Special Reference to Black Worship,” 176.

<sup>88</sup> Cone, 176, 179.

<sup>89</sup> Barbara Holmes, *Joy Unspeakable: Contemplative Practices of the Black Church*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004), 115 – 116.

<sup>90</sup> James Evans Jr., *We Have Been Believers: An African American Systematic Theology* (second edition), (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2012), 145-6.

<sup>91</sup> I hasten to say that there is nothing intrinsically wrong with worship that includes exuberant expressions that are entertaining. Psalm 100 does speak about making a joyful noise to God as we express thanksgiving. Psalm 150 describes the use of various musical instruments and of dancing in worshipping God.

and stamps a new identity on their persons”<sup>92</sup> more religious romanticizing than authentic insight into a profound ontological shift that has healing and revolutionary potential? I do hope that what Cone describes actually occurs in some degree for many African American worshippers. Yet, Holmes reminds us that “the rocking incessant rhythms fail to drown out addiction, unemployment, and alienation,” and she proceeds to claim that “we are a people who have forgotten how to lament and repent in community.”<sup>93</sup> Van Der Kolk does describe an episode during the Truth and Reconciliation process in South Africa which could seem to address my pondering. At some point the women present at a session for victims of rape became aware of violent action by security forces somewhere outside and this brought their trauma imprints to the surface. He describes a scene of momentary emotional collapse, with the women slumped over, frozen, and exuding a sense of helplessness. Then, he says, one of the women started to hum and gently swaying back and forth. “Slowly a rhythm emerged; bit by bit other women joined in. Soon the whole group was singing, moving, and getting up to dance. It was astounding transformation: people coming back to life, faces becoming attuned, vitality returning to bodies.” Inspired by this experience, Van Der Kolk committed to study how rhythm, chanting, and movement can help to heal trauma.<sup>94</sup> And being convinced that when appropriately employed these expressions are very helpful, they are not excluded from the considerations behind my proposal regarding the development of a spirituo-therapeutic practice that combines elements from Christianity, Kemetic Yoga, Falun Gong, and Body and Breath Practices.

That said, I quickly point out that what Van Der Kolk observed was obviously not a carefully orchestrated process by a skilled worship leader that was designed to generate excitement, even frenzy, in order to camouflage psychosomatic dis-integration and make those present susceptible to the rhetorical devices of a preacher who would take them even “higher.” Instead, this was an act of self-motivation by the women in the interest of a process designed for them to find voice and tell their own story. Still, I’m doubtful whether without well-attuned therapeutic facilitation they would make significant progress toward the kind of full-body healing being explored in this essay. Therefore, whatever else might motivate the organization of trauma-informed worship the following question needs to be answered. In what ways might its

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<sup>92</sup> James Evans Jr., *We Have Been Believers*, 185.

<sup>93</sup> Barbara Holmes, *Joy Unspeakable*, 95.

<sup>94</sup> Bessel Van der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score*, 216.

elements contribute to the psychosomatic integration through mindsight Siegel promotes or help set the stage for the intentional and well-guided full-body engagement he, Menakem, and Van Der Kolk identify as vital to healing?

With acknowledgment that in the Dallas/Fort Worth metroplex I have become acquainted with a number of wise-progressive Black pastors, I now make explicit my fear that often preaching serves as the “high”-point of a culture of addiction. Indeed, there is nothing in the world quite like the hypnotic and mesmerizing word-smiting of an African American preacher. As supported by many examples, when used responsibly, preaching can be the most effective way of reaching large numbers of people with rich biblical and theological insight that opens the way for complex exploration of ideas about God and the world and issues in transforming action. Yet, the call-and-response style of preaching, which, at its best, can pull persons beyond the loss of voice that results from trauma, can easily become the goad for expressions designed to cheer performance and communicate the impression that the one “on show” is the best preaching-artist. Whether reflexive or coaxed, responses are sometimes reflective of the fear generated by the preacher’s role as the primary evaluator of congregant’s spiritual pedigree and/or congregants desire for approval that is associated with well-nurtured emotional and spiritual dependence in the interest of pastoral domination and control.

When preoccupation with self-aggrandizement is combined with the spirit of domination and control, preaching in any context becomes a most unhealthy pursuit. We end up with a situation in which verbosity is mistaken for deep thinking, giftedness at alliteration is portrayed as wisdom, and dramatic flair becomes the primary sign of great insight. Fed repeatedly with this diet, members of some churches become adept at rolling out catch phrases that have poetic beauty. However, many will not develop the inclination, conceptual foundation and analytic tools to carry out the strenuous-discomfiting wrestling with biblical narratives and doctrinal formulations (especially concepts of God) that have contributed to our oppression. Neither will they do well at relating well-considered biblical and theological insights in critical and creative ways to insights from other sources and be viable partners with others in developing a revolutionary vision for this nation and world. In the final analysis, it will be immensely difficult to create an appropriate space where religio-theological insights can be critically and creatively engaged with psychiatric, neurobiological and sociological insights to engender integral healing and transformation.



Being aware of this dynamic and the ways focus on the superstar preacher can disempower a congregation, Holmes declares: “In my opinion the black church cannot sustain itself if it continues to rely on the cult of preaching personalities.”<sup>95</sup> Certainly, the danger of preaching is heightened when there is the failure to appreciate that the narratives and pronouncements in the Bible and the theological formulations we employ or develop reflect the influence of one discursive framework or another, which, among other features, are always political in character.

Yet, there is another concern with even greater sabotaging potential. Cone’s picture of Black worship as escape from six days of degradation is appealing, but what is the impact of this so-called escape when those in the situation are caught up in the discursive trap generated from the grounding mythos of the nation? The reality is that the very psychosomatic dis-integration that results from trauma causes some/many African Americans end up living a bifurcated existence in which Sunday’s dynamics have little to do with the other days of occupational, interpersonal, familial and communal engagements. In other words, as happens often, the reverse process from “the rupture in time” enables these persons to move from a day of ecstatic revelry and eschatological fellowship to other days that are almost completely devoted to the American Dream. The pious “enthusiast” for a day then becomes a rapacious pursuer of success through deceit and cut-throat competitiveness, in mimicking the privileged understanding of power as domination and control and in the wanton craving for the commercial fruits of the very system that oppresses us.

#### *How Might Black Church Life Be Enriched?*

I begin an answer to this question by reminding us of Latin expressions that are often considered in traditional Reformed and Roman Catholic settings - *lex orandi, lex credendi, lex vivendi* - which can be translated “as we worship, so we believe, so we live.” There is a shorter and more well-known version that only includes the first two elements and places the emphasis on worship and the ways it reflects what we believe. The longer version, which I favor, does not simply represent a linear causal movement from praying/worshipping through believing to

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<sup>95</sup> Barbara Holmes, *Joy Unspeakable*, 115 – 116.

everyday life. It refers to a dynamic inter-fecundating relationship between all three elements. In other words:

- Our expressions of communion with God should be fed by and should reflect and challenge the way we wrestle with the faith, what we believe, and the way we conduct our lives.
- Our wrestling and believing should be fed by and should reflect and challenge our worship and our actions in the world.
- The conduct of our every-day lives should be fed by and should reflect and challenge our wrestling and believing and the way we approach worship.

I support Cone's admonition that we should not allow our desire to demonstrate the political nature of the gospel to turn worship into a political strategy session. At the same time, informed by *lex orandi, lex credendi, lex vivendi*, I insist that the activities of worship associated with the posture of intentional self-margination should provide the tools and insight that guide creative rebellion against any socio-cultural and economic structure that threatens the well-being of the African American community. Indeed, it should be one of the most important venues for the demythologization and remythologization that can free African Americans from the trap of the nation's grounding mythos. Appropriating insights from Latin American liberation theology, I suggest that, whatever else is involved, the challenge of the historical and contemporary social situation unearthed in the socio-political mediation must be brought into dialectical engagement with biblical and theological ideas – this representing the hermeneutical mediation. These must result in the kind of practical mediation that gives concrete testimony to the oft-repeated declaration in The Lord's prayer: "Thy Kingdom/Realm come on earth as it is in heaven."<sup>96</sup>

As such, we need to discern and help each other appreciate the diverse work of the Spirit and the unique ecstasy that can be experienced in the arduous exploration of texts and concepts, using scholarly and popular wisdom, in critical relation to ongoing life-situations, along with ongoing therapeutic engagement. We would then become attuned to the voice of the Spirit in the challenging insights that emerge for short and long-term strategies to move beyond surviving to thriving and in the creative means employed to communicate those insights in a diversity of

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<sup>96</sup> See discussion of these mediations in Leonardo Boff, Clodovis Boff, *Introducing Liberation Theology* (24<sup>th</sup> printing), (New York: Orbis Press, 2011), 24-32, 15.

settings. As the reader might imagine, I am of the view that the psychosomatic full-body integrative pursuits that have been discussed in this essay are also works of the Spirit. And a very important responsibility of Black churches is to communicate this insight and to encourage those they influence to view therapy facilitated by appropriately attuned professionals to be as fundamental to personal and communal health as praying, praising, proclaiming, and protesting.

In considering who might be involved in the Spirit-guided interactions just alluded to, I'm attracted by Kelly Brown Douglas' and Raphael Warnock's desire for Black and Womanist theologies to enter into dialogue with the Black church. Brown Douglas encourages Womanist thinkers to privilege this kind of dialogue over that which they are accustomed to pursuing at academic settings such as the American Academy of Religion and the Society of Biblical Literature. She insists that the Black church, community-based women, and women in struggle should be the main audience of Womanist dialogue.<sup>97</sup> Warnock goes into much detail on this matter. Speaking of Black liberation theology, he laments that decades after this movement emerged from the Black Church, both Black pastors and Black theologians have become trapped in their respective enclaves of ecclesial and academic privilege and this has limited their capacities for sustained conversation about the mission of the Black church. Both sides suffer, he says. Black theology is left without a platform for public expression of its prophetic witness in the very place in which it first emerged, and the Black church is denied the critical tools necessary for examining the theological meaning of its Black identity in the context of a nation in crisis.<sup>98</sup>

Warnock's approach to Womanist theology is characterized by an interesting tension. On one hand, Womanists are viewed as representatives of the marginalized majority (women) in the Black church. On the other hand, while Black theology was generated by radical Black pastors that had roots within the Black church, Womanist theology was born in the academy. Thus, "although womanist theology is sourced by the pain, experiences, and wisdom of ordinary black women," it "embodies even more deeply than black theology the class tensions and institutional barriers that have made it difficult ... to fully ignite the fires of radical discontent latent in the

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<sup>97</sup> Raphael G. Warnock, *The Divided Mind of the Black Church – Theology, Piety and Public Witness*, (New York: New York University Press, 2019), 158. From Kelly Brown Douglas, *Black Christ (Bishop Henry McNeal Turner/Sojourner Truth Series in Black Religion)*, (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993), 114.

<sup>98</sup> Warnock, *The Divided Mind of the Black Church*, 142.

religion of the black mass church.”<sup>99</sup> Even with this limitation, Warnock is anxious for Womanists to challenge Black churches to become more embracing of wide-ranging diversity and more open to dialogue even as they bear prophetic witness against the violence inflicted on Black women not only by a white racist system but also by the patriarchal ethos that is very evident in Black churches and other Black contexts.<sup>100</sup> So, consider the intellectual, social and spiritual richness that is possible within congregations as Womanists empower the voices of ordinary churchwomen and push “pastors and theologians to reconsider the complex intersectionality between black women’s piety and black people’s liberation ....”<sup>101</sup>

I say that the desired engagements will be most refreshing and liberating when the churches in which they occur are permeated by the ethos of the margins and are open to the work of the Spirit that results in diverse expressions of piety that cannot be contained by the Pentecostalist and Sanctified Church traditions Raphael Warnock considers vital to the invigoration of Black theology.<sup>102</sup> Indeed, the trauma work discussed already and the coming exploration of Howard Thurman’s “inward journey,” are eligible to be considered as potential forms of piety if pursued with the requisite seriousness and attention to personal transformation and communal wholeness. This consideration should influence the way we go about fashioning ecclesial interactions on the margins that are conducive to creative imagination from which could emerge important elements of a worldview and communal mythos to counter that which has been dominant in this nation.

Imagine then, Black congregations as Spirit-driven laboratories in which the responsibilities of pastoral leaders include pursuits that enable the following to occur.

- Visions are cast for the possible life of the African American community in the US and for the possible future of this nation as part of the whole world.
- There is introduction of concepts and ideas that provide grounding in faith and provoke experimental thinking.
- Appropriate tools for critical analysis and constructive exploration are developed, with the expectation that they will be used in the engagement of pastoral visions and ideas

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<sup>99</sup> Warnock, 158.

<sup>100</sup> Warnock, 157-60, 170-172.

<sup>101</sup> Warnock, 154.

<sup>102</sup> Warnock, 168-9; 183-4.

- Well-facilitated avenues are opened up for engagement of thought and planning of concrete action.
- Channels are opened up for communication and mutual (not necessarily equal) influence between laboratories and with the wider field of life in which persons of all kinds strive for survival and flourishing.
- A structure for the ongoing “care of souls” is put in place to contribute to the spiritual and psychological health of person who carry multi-generational injury while involved in experimentation that could be unsettling at times.
- All the above feed into and are fed by ongoing experimentation with liturgical formulations with artistic expressions and musical compositions that reflect our pain, popularize our theologies, guide our hope and fuel our revolutionary zeal.

As a part of this process – seen as an outgrowth of the dynamic life of the Spirit – the leadership of African American churches and those of us who operate in supportive frameworks should devise ways to draw members of the wider network of communities we serve into ongoing wrestling with values that are consistent with the active presence of the Realm of God/The Beloved Community among us. As suggested before, this wider framework could likely include religious and non-religious persons from outside the broad African American community who have established themselves as authentic allies. Here I mention that, being fascinated by the fact that four very important sources I have depended on in this essay are linked to the Jewish community and appreciating that it is not implausible to conclude that their people’s experience of Holocaust had something to do with their interest, I am wondering if an important component of the restorative work for African Americans is the encouragement of those inclined to the relevant scientific and therapeutic endeavors to view attention to this matter as a vocation. Indeed, there should be no hesitation in viewing this encouragement as evangelism in the best sense of the term.

Driven by revolutionary desire and fueled by the dynamic just described, the conscientious African American preacher-pastor-activist becomes a menace to the regnant national order, a most effective purveyor of prophetic wisdom and a galvanizing agent that brings diverse peoples together for the sake of radical multidimensional transformation. This

being so, I suggest some important requirements for preacher-pastors who operate in the interest of the revolution to which I'm seeking to contribute.

- A shift from being a symbol of God's favor through the acquisition of wealth and power to being a member of a vanguard which embraces the responsibility to nurture revolutionary consciousness among the people that directs them to the need to become intentionally involved in the construction of communities of healing, transformation, and justice.
- The willingness to combine informed rhetoric with a personal lifestyle that will lure members of the African American community toward the awareness that they can flourish personally and at the same time cooperate in the flourishing of others and in the building of a social, economic, psychological and spiritual infrastructure to support the welfare of our progeny.
  - Embrace "Seventh Generation" thinking which some link to the constitution of the Iroquois Confederacy of Native American peoples. This commitment requires that in the pursuit of our personal and communal lives we should utilize resources and put in place plans and strategies for contemporary development that are guided by our consideration of the potential consequences for the seventh generation of our progeny. The work to be pursued that addresses the history and contemporary expressions of Black trauma should be high on the list of priorities.
- Embrace of the leadership disposition captured in the notion *primus inter pares* (chief among equals), which presumes that those we lead are our partners in God's mission and requires that we treat them that way. This disposition involves the responsibility to help members of the African American community practice responsible freedom, realize their varied potentials and live into the concrete expression of their equality in humanity and under God.<sup>103</sup>

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<sup>103</sup> In the book *Freedom in Resistance and Creative Transformation* I address multiple dimensions of this challenge as I promote freedom that is finite, realistically libertarian and relational.

- Resist the temptation to use religious structures to perpetuate similar power dynamics to the ones by which our ancestors were subordinated and denied the freedom to live their lives on their own terms.
  - Therefore, view teaching and empowerment as high priorities of pastoral responsibility. Pursue this task with the hope that members will grow to the place where they don't need the pastor as a shepherd but as chief facilitating partner along with others like scientists, therapists, investment consultants, and social workers in God's mission.
  - By lifestyle model the relentless pursuit of integrated selfhood, along with justice and compassion, which is as compatible as possible with the vision of the Realm of God manifested in Jesus' full life.
- Be an educated visionary, galvanizer and strategist who is willing to engage in critical solidarity with a wide range of persons, groups and institutions that are attuned to the complex needs of the broad African American community.
  - Identify and bring together expertise and resources and help to develop a framework of engagement that results in ongoing refinement of thought and concrete processes that fuel flourishing in local contexts and, in turn, contributes to the welfare of the wider community.
  - Resist the inclination to protect the authority of the church by ignoring or denying the significance of various global philosophies or insights about the cosmos, including human beings, from the natural and social sciences.<sup>104</sup> Consider that the institutional church is at its best a servant for the sake of God's purposes in the world. As such, its institutional character is provisional, and the understanding of its role in each era and its appropriate configuration ought to be informed by consideration of what God is revealing about the world through as many media as are available. Consider also, that our

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<sup>104</sup> In the process, we would identify the long and rich history of achievement in all these disciplines by Africans and people of African heritage in the US and elsewhere.

I am quite intrigued that Rachel Yehuda is with Michelle Friedman (psychiatrist and psychoanalyst) co-author of the text *the Art of Jewish Pastoral Counseling – A Guide for All Faiths*, (New York, Routledge, 2017).

resistance might reflect greater concern for our personal welfare than the integrity of the church.

- View our responsibility to the African American community as one important element of the fundamental calling to participate in God's transforming of the world.
- Renounce the anti-intellectualism that often cloaks itself in popular doctrines of personal revelation.

### *Fulsome Healing Requires Robust Spirituality*

It is to enrich the store of resources that are available to complexify the character of spirituality facilitated within Black churches, and build bridges with what is occurring in other Black spaces, that I encourage us to work toward the time when many of Howard Thurman's insights might become more than exotica and be embraced as legitimate guides for nurturing the faith of regular folk. Thurman, in speaking of the "inward journey," points to the "ebb and flow of anxiety within us because always there seems to be so little time for withdrawal, for reflection." Many are afraid to go inward and dig deep beneath the veneer of "ok-ness" and the pretence of flourishing, which we desperately desire to convey through religious and social exuberance, acquisitiveness and the trappings of accomplishment. In our national culture of packaging, display and noise this inward journey may seem too inconspicuous and lacking the kind of public and dramatic impact that makes us appear impressive. Yet, this we must do in order to face the psychic distortions<sup>105</sup> produced by historical and ongoing trauma and with appropriate support pursue healing.

I invite members of the African American community to consider the path Thurman promotes which leads to the state "where at last the Time of Quiet is our portion." There, with "the stillness of our own spirits" we engage in honest self-scrutiny of elements of our lives that "are so far beneath the surface of our movements and our functioning that we are unmindful not only of their presence but also the quality of their influence on our decisions, our judgements, and our behaviour." Clearly these elements include anxiety, addiction, grief, anger, feelings of worthlessness, hyper-vigilance, and panics that have been mentioned before. Thurman suggests

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<sup>105</sup> I remind the reader that I use psychic in its broad range of meanings to cover what therapists refer to as psychological and some religious persons refer to as the soul.



that, having stilled ourselves “deeply in God’s presence” and become exposed to ourselves, we lay bare the totality of our lives before God “as an act of sacrament.” This “lifting and exposing of all [elements of our lives] before God” is followed by waiting “for God’s benediction and healing.”<sup>106</sup> Here I wonder how this spiritual disposition might be achieved through intentional embrace and judicious engagement of all components of the dynamic alluded to by Monica Coleman’s reminder that Black religion “is a syncretic movement that includes the influence of European Christianity and its adaptation by slaves and nineteenth – and twentieth century believers.”<sup>107</sup> Here I propose that the grounding structure for such adaptations was suffused by retentions of the spiritualities enslaved peoples brought with them from Africa and handed on to their descendants. Interestingly, Professor Coleman is an ordained minister in the African Methodist Episcopal Church and also an initiate in traditional Yoruba religion.

### *Therapy as Spiritual and Political*

These are delicate steps for persons in the midst of turbulence and/or who live with a sense of fractured selfhood. As such, I imagine them occurring most efficaciously in private or public spaces when guided by persons whose spiritual sensibilities are well-nurtured and who have a good enough understanding of the psychosomatic dynamics of the human self. When well-orchestrated, such moves create the opening that can free many of us from the kind of dissociation and splitting involved in the perception of God as the one who “sits high and looks low” and becomes involved in our lives through intrusions from “above.” Authentic spirituality would then not be “something that comes from outside to be added to the essential fabric of life.” Instead, it would express the dynamics of creativity at the heart of life understood to have God as the ultimate ground of its structure. From this dynamic would result “the kind of integrating and transformation by human beings of the physical, economic and social conditions of their existence, which makes them human.”<sup>108</sup>

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<sup>106</sup> Howard Thurman, *The Inward Journey* (Richmond, Indiana: Friends United Press, 1961), 123-124. 136-137.

<sup>107</sup> Monica Coleman, *Making a Way Out of No Way: A Womanist Theology*, (Fortress Press, 2008), 39.

<sup>108</sup> Eloi Messi Metogo, “Postcolonial Theology in an African Context,” in Hille Haker, Luiz Carlo Susin et al, *Postcolonial Theology, Concilium - International Journal of Theology*, 2013/2, (London: SCM Press, 2013), 92 – 104.

Presuming the loss of language that results from trauma to which Ann Joh, Elaine Scarry, and Dorothee Sölle allude, I appreciate the importance of Goleman's recommendation that we should also practice retelling and reconstructing the story of the traumatic event(s) as vividly as possible so that feelings generated in the subcortical region of brains are brought under the control of the neocortex, becoming more understandable and manageable and available for reconfiguration as new narratives.<sup>109</sup> Indeed, some persons might insist that what I've described is already being practiced in some places. However, it needs to be recognized that Goleman has in mind a situation which is guided by appropriately trained therapists who can properly utilize the process for the benefit of clients.

While the typical situation in which the history of slavery, legal segregation and continued systemic oppression is recounted by African Americans will not be like a formal therapy session, we need to carefully consider what constitutes the most helpful circumstance in which it ought to occur and the most helpful combination of facilitators who can utilize it to achieve the greatest degree of healing and transformation.

With Anne Joh's inspiration, I suggest that there is a quality of healing and transformation that will only be achieved with appropriate tarrying with our grief and the willingness not only to grieve openly but to turn our grief in the direction of political action.<sup>110</sup> Where open expression of grief is concerned, there is clear precedence in the sorrow songs (spirituals and blues) and in the moans and groans of our slave fore parents, especially women. In our time the demands of life and the influence of the dominant culture have made some of us afraid of grief, and those of that culture who fear being reminded of their connection with the brutal history of this nation often tell us to "get over it." However, we who live with the inflictions of this history must not let go of the insight that public grieving can be both resistance and confrontation. In addition, embracing the therapeutic and political significance of grief will serve as restraint to those within the African American community who think that turning worship into "happy fests" is central to portraying the transformative power of faith.

The character of the political action Ann Joh recommends must be carefully considered, in light of Micah White's call to revolutionary innovation which privileges "mental

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<sup>109</sup> Daniel Goleman, *Emotional Intelligence*, 2011.

<sup>110</sup> Anne Joh, "A Postcolonial Spectrality of the Cross," *Concilium*, 41-50.

environmentalism”<sup>111</sup> and my call to intentional self-margination. Together, they remind us that in these United States it is truly radical when we find the will and claim the space to resist the consumerism with which we have been strategically infected by those who continue in our time the religio-economic project of big business discussed by scholars like theologian Joerg Rieger and the historian Kevin Kruse.<sup>112</sup> Are we not pointed to a way in which the mystical “inward journey” promoted by Howard Thurman is connected with political action when white points out that “Activists of the future ... must be ... as concerned with the health of our interior world as we are about the natural world”? Quite tellingly, white also claims that “there is a connection between the level of pollution in our minds and the prevalence of pollution in the world.”<sup>113</sup>

What better public expression of pain-turned-toward the political by ordinary people have we seen in recent times than Khizr and Ghazala Khan’s presentation at the 2016 Democratic Party’s Convention in Philadelphia. In their impressive presentation the Khans marshalled the grief associated with the memory of their son who died while serving in Iraq to challenge President Donald Trump about his attitude to the Muslim community and the character of his commitment of the US. Even more significant was their willingness to engage the blowback that followed. In one interview Khizr Khan pointed to an important quality that is required by ordinary African Americans who would “step out” politically with the willingness to persist in public action over a sustained period. When asked if there were times when he wished he’d not carried out public action, he answered “No, no, not at all, not at all. We are really deliberate people.”<sup>114</sup>

Not all political actions need be as public as the Khans. However, the deliberateness of which they spoke must be practiced. It will enable ordinary members of the African American community to sustain the political act of denouncing and renouncing the intentional distractions that have been directed our way to encourage us to utilize our resources in self-indulgent and escapist ways. Here again, there is evident connection between white’s disposition and the spirit

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<sup>111</sup> micah white, *The End of Protest – A New Playbook for Revolution*, (Alfred A. Knopf, 2016), 168. Here white explains that “mental environmentalism means working from the assumption that there is a connection between the level of pollution in our minds and the prevalence of pollution in the world.”

<sup>112</sup> In the earlier essay I referred to Kruse’s respected work *One Nation Under God: How Corporate America Invented Christian America*, (New York: Basic Books, 2015).

<sup>113</sup> white, *The End of Protest*, 172-3

<sup>114</sup> See: <http://www.npr.org/templates/transcript/transcript.php?storyId=488858174>.

behind Thurman's invitation to an "inward journey" when the former mentions that, "for activists of the future, the ground of our struggle is humanity's mental environment – in our collective unconscious, the shared pool of myths, dreams and desires that shapes how the world manifests."<sup>115</sup> This connection is confirmed later on when white asserts that "in our global struggle to liberate humanity, the most significant battles will be fought on the spiritual level – inside our heads, within our imagination and deep in our collective unconscious."<sup>116</sup> While bell hooks would likely be uncomfortable with the privileging of "head-space," she is in sync with the promotion of an interior journey which she addresses in light of her reflections on Spirit and spirituality. Having challenged Black women to increased attention to contemplative space and to find time for solitude, she points attention to life in the spirit which is one in which "our habits of being enable us to hear our inner voices, to comprehend reality with both our heart and our mind, puts us in touch with divine essence." It is via this mode of operation, she says, that we can "fashion a life that is fundamentally rooted in [our] understanding of the value of human life and intersubjective communion where [we] experience the unity of all life."<sup>117</sup>

I hasten to acknowledge that hooks' approach to spirituality, like that of the millennial white and a growing number of his generation, does not require a personal God. hooks uses characterizations that are intended to speak to a range of expressions of transcendence found among contemporary Black women.<sup>118</sup> Speaking to contemporary activists, white promotes spirituality that involves them being gripped by "an ephemeral force that exceeds the material" and constitutes the group spirit that gives strength to the social body ... and harnesses "the people's primal heroism ...."<sup>119</sup> My orientation does presuppose God as an actuality. However, there is still important compatibility with the intention behind both dispositions. white represents the point of connection well as he challenges us to look beneath the more obvious and dramatic and to become susceptible to the quality of transcendence that is required for appropriate insight into the reality in which we're caught up, vision to appreciate the scope of the venture we're in, and the substance to persist in struggle and to transmit hope and purpose to succeeding

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<sup>115</sup> micah white, *The End of Protest*, 172.

<sup>116</sup> white, *The End of Protest*, 173.

<sup>117</sup> Hooks, *Sisters of the Yam*, 185-187.

<sup>118</sup> Along with "God," she uses terms like "higher self," and refers to "divine spirits" and "higher powers."

<sup>119</sup> micah white, *End of Process*. 225.

generations.<sup>120</sup> In my schema, it is then that we are on the way to becoming revolutionary because we are enabled to cast off the bondage of fear and are readied to “break the script” of the customary that has been constructed in reflexive reactions to the frightening.

Of importance, is the recognition that both the internal and external expressions of consciousness that need healing are central to proper appreciation of the renewal of the mind referred to in Romans 12: 1-2 to which followers of Jesus the Christ should make themselves open. It reads:

I appeal to you therefore ... by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that you may prove what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.

In this matter Thurman seems ahead of his time in his consistency with the contemporary insights from neuroscience I’ve been exploring throughout the essay. He points out that the repetition of certain religious disciplines results in a situation in which “Literally a new neurological pattern begins to emerge, which pattern slowly begins to supplant and then to undermine other established behaviour patterns; thus, in time, giving to the total nervous system an altered neurological structure.”<sup>121</sup> Given DeGruy’s proposal of how constant reinforcement results in culture and the evidence of epigenetic impact I’ve discussed, the threat of the old pattern will probably not go away completely. However, the orientation of mind and spirit will have been set on a new trajectory that with disciplined endeavour enables personal and community progress even as we struggle and make mistakes.

In light of this challenge, I recall that before identifying the desired metamorphosis, the apostle enjoined the believer not to be conformed to patterns of life (the world) that work against the values of the Realm of God. There are also a number of passages (e.g. Ephesians 4:23-24;

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<sup>120</sup> The reader might find white’s short section on “prophecy and protest” and his “final word to the ones to come” interesting. See white, 254-257, 258-9.

<sup>121</sup> Howard Thurman, *The Creative Encounter: An Interpretation of Religion and Social Witness*, Richmond, Indiana: Friends United Press, 84.

Philippians 3:12-14) that remind us of the self-discipline and persistence required to lessen our susceptibility to these “worldly” patterns. One passage I find quite appealing is Romans 13:14 which seems to suggest that it is active identification with Jesus that will counter the debilitating desires (lusts) to which we often fall prey. Here I insist that to appreciate the full significance of this passage we need to break with a transactionalist fixation on Jesus’ death and resurrection and take stock of his whole human life in which he was required on an ongoing basis to consider issues and make decisions in light of the values of the Realm of God. The persistent struggle over the course of Jesus’ life to operate in a way that was consistent with the values of this Realm is most evident in the gospel of Luke’s version of his temptations in the wilderness. There in 4:13 we are told that, having been resisted, the devil only left him until another opportune time. It is Jesus’ persistent choice to be guided by the values of the Realm of God, with this evidenced in his attitudes to both powerful and powerless in his context, that kept him open to growth over the course of his life so that even when tempted to seek escape from looming tragedy (Luke 22:42) he was able to stay the course toward the fulfilment of that which he sensed was his purpose.

I’m well aware that there are progressive white Christians who are genuinely enthusiastic supporters of Black quests for liberation and I encourage African Americans to carefully nurture collaborations in which there is clear recognition of the need for Black people to take charge of their own lives. That said, I sometimes wonder how far white progressives can go since such relations need to involve privileging self-marginated Black spaces rather than integrated spaces. The denomination (Christian Church - Disciples of Christ) with which I’m associated has embedded within it an organization (The National Convention) dedicated to the interest of Black people.<sup>122</sup> After 60 years since merger with the larger Euro American group the jury is still out on the level of success the Convention can achieve in such close proximity to those who in different degrees carry the legacy of the historical oppressor. Yet, it would still be a bold step for other white progressive churches to support the development of similar frameworks. An immense challenge would be for Euro Americans who still dominate in these progressive communions to appreciate that they are not exempt from the consequences of racism and white supremacy. They also have benefitted from the structural inequities it reflects and generates. As

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<sup>122</sup> Visit the National Convocation at <https://www.nationalconvocation.org/>.

such, I'm clear that the only Euro American dominated religious communions that should even imagine this possibility are those who have been seriously wrestling with what being Euro American without white supremacy (white-body supremacy) might look like.<sup>123</sup> Better yet, it is getting to the place where there is openness to wrestle with James Cone's suggestion that those who wish to support Black people in their quest for liberation "must be willing to lose their white identity"<sup>124</sup>-indeed, to destroy it."<sup>125</sup>

#### IV

##### **Concluding Thoughts: Compassion, Forgiveness, Reconciliation?!**

As I move toward the conclusion of this essay, it would be disingenuous of me to avoid a significant challenge hooks presents to Black women which seems relevant to the whole Black community as it pursues healing. It has to do with the fostering of a commitment to compassion, forgiveness and reconciliation. She explicitly declares that "compassion and forgiveness make reconciliation possible." Compassion, she says, is rooted in understanding, and space is created for its activation when we release our preoccupation with blame. Significantly, she is of the view that our capacity to forgive cleanses us of negative clutter and allows us to be in touch with our own agency, that is, "the power to act on our own behalf to change a situation."<sup>126</sup> Convinced that the clutter hooks has in mind includes the despair, sense of ever-present danger, and paralysis that undermines the ability to move beyond the fears, doubts and vacant esteem said by DeGruy to limit one's choices,<sup>127</sup> I view the personal agency hooks promotes as allied to the

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<sup>123</sup> Resmaa Menakem, *My Grandmother's Hands*, 261-285 (Chapter 21). He mentions notable Euro Americans like Tim Wise, Robin DiAngelo, Peggy McIntosh and Jim Wallis as persons who could offer wisdom on this matter.

<sup>124</sup> I understand what Cone refers to as "white-identity" to be equivalent to "whiteness," which, as a social construct, was established as the ideological principle for integrating diverse peoples of European descent into an American power block and as a norm continues to guide assessments of belonging, acceptability, social privilege, even human worth in America.

<sup>125</sup> James Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation (Fortieth Anniversary Edition)*, (New York: Orbis Books, 2-12), 66.

<sup>126</sup> bell hooks, *Sisters of the Yam*, 167-171.

<sup>127</sup> hooks, 122, 125, 130, 135, 143, 148, 160, 165, 193.

sense of self-ownership Van Der Kolk claims to emerge as trauma imprints are addressed and persons grow in the ability to fully open their hearts to the Other.<sup>128</sup>

A quick reaction might be that hooks only has the internal dynamics of the Black community in mind when she speaks in this way, and it is indeed the case that when in the course of exploring these notions she does identify a specific situation of tension it is between Black women and Black men.<sup>129</sup> On the other hand, while there are many references to the oppressive dynamics of a white supremacist ethos in the book, hooks does not mention white America in the course of her discussion of compassion, forgiveness and reconciliation.

Does this mean that directing compassion, forgiveness and reconciliation toward Euro Americans is not important to Black women's pursuit of health? We do not know for sure, and I will not make any inference from silence. Instead, when pondering the benefits of self-margination, I ask the reader to include the likely outcomes from the robust pursuits hooks has in mind for the sake of Black women's healing and which I think has relevance for the whole Black community. Would the compassion, forgiveness and reconciliation that is generated in the narrow sphere which is hooks' immediate focus not unavoidably flow into the wider sphere of engagement? To encourage the kind of aspiration I think would be most beneficial in many contexts, including the frameworks with which I'm most familiar, I point attention to Siegel's claim that an important element of the multifaceted integration he promotes has to do with the "neurobiology of 'we'" that involves movement from reactivity to receptivity.<sup>130</sup> Important to this movement is the activation of mirror neurons in the frontal lobes of the brain which enable empathetic connection with the Other. It is understandable that when the amygdala of a traumatized person is hyperactive this dynamic will be undermined and so not permit the movement beyond judgement or negative sympathy that hinders authentic expression of the compassionate disposition hooks highly recommends.<sup>131</sup> Siegel represents the situation more starkly. He declares that when we are primarily survival driven we lose some or all of the nine functions of the prefrontal cortex<sup>132</sup> and "revert to primitive behaviour without flexibility or

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<sup>128</sup> Van Der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score*. Chapter 7 focuses on this issue.

<sup>129</sup> Van Der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score*, 164, 168.

<sup>130</sup> Daniel Siegel, *Mindsight*, 117-119, 210-231.

<sup>131</sup> bell hooks, *Sisters of the Yam*, 169-9.

<sup>132</sup> These functions are bodily regulation, attuned communication, emotional balance, response flexibility, fear modulation, empathy, insight, moral awareness and intuition.



compassion. We act impulsively, lose the ability to balance our emotions, and fail to exert moral reasoning .... Instead of being guided by understanding and compassionate concern, even for those who threaten us, our mind-sightless response is to become hostile and inflexible, and to lose our moral compass”<sup>133</sup>

Siegel provides an example of breakthrough in this area as he related with a gifted lawyer Stuart which makes me wonder about the possible contribution to more authentic relations as Black people operate in narrow or extended spheres of life. After months of therapeutic engagement, there was a moment when Siegel recalled information Stuart had given about his older brother’s skiing accident when they were boys. This recollection caused the normally stoic Stuart to burst into tears. Siegel suggested to Stuart that the event might still be raw in his mind, and Stuart indicated that this was not the case. Stuart proceeded to explain in the following way: “I can’t believe you remembered what I said months ago .... I can’t believe you really know me.” Actually, a significant element of what had occurred is that Stuart was opening up to himself in a new way and was allowing himself to be known by Siegel. As Siegel put it: “I can’t really put words to what happened, but – half a year into therapy – there now seemed to be a ‘we’ in the room .... Just as Stuart had been moved to tears at realizing that his mind was in mine, I felt deeply moved by feeling, for the first time, that mine was in his.”<sup>134</sup> These two persons were experiencing the kind of mutual recognition that is fundamental to authentic relationality and vital for the community solidarity that enables the marginal space to be a healing space.

I’m quite mindful of the extent to which important proposals throughout this essay go against the grain of the dominant social order to which African Americans are connected. Hopefully, the reader has gained important insight into the ways the killing of Tyre Nichols reflects the pernicious character of this order and the tragic consequences that often result from uncritical identification with or enmeshment in it. Overall, I’m convinced that only a drastic move will save African America from increased destabilization and general regression in the social dynamic as the nation moves to the period in its history (2045) where the emerging configuration of ethnic minorities will have numerical dominance. Progressing from merely surviving to thriving requires the pursuit of a very different way to be and live than has hitherto

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<sup>133</sup> Siegel, *Mindsight*, 258-9.

<sup>134</sup> Siegel, *Mindsight*, 117.

seemed normal. As such, I have pursued this essay with the acute awareness that what I hope to occur for African Americans in the dedicated space called intentional margination, which includes focussed address of transgenerational trauma and its impacts, has significant implications for institutions like Brite Divinity School that claim inclusive justice as an important value and are committed to prepare persons to exercise leadership in settings where Black flourishing is a central concern or to be allies to those in this endeavour. Therefore, I encourage readers connected to our institution to consider academic arrangements, community processes, and connecting ventures by which we might support the African American community in general and Black congregations in particular as the healing enterprise is pursued – this with the awareness that what occurs in these contexts has application in other settings with which we are associated. Finally, I encourage those of us who struggle with symptoms of Post Traumatic *Slavery* Disorder to avoid getting so stuck in our pain that it becomes our identity. And I challenge us to appreciate that the pursuit of a disciplined life, characterized by integrity and accountability, is crucial to the success we rightfully desire and to the pursuit of personal and communal healing as a life-time endeavour.