Excerpts from *This Here Flesh* by Cole Arthur Riley

Ch. 1: Dignity

Our societies and comsabmunities have a way of grinding up and serving out dignity in portions based on our own human ideals and idols. In the history of the white Western world, you can trace a perversion of dignity in the name of usefulness. You are no longer the image of God, you are currency. We cannot help but entwine our concept of dignity with how much a person can do. The sick, the elderly, the disabled, the neurodivergent, my sweet cousin on the autism spectrum—we tend to assign a lesser social value to those whose "doing" cannot be enslaved into a given output. We should look to them as sacred guides out of the bondage of productivity. Instead, we withhold social status and capital, and we neglect to acknowledge that theirs is a liberation we can learn from.

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For this reason, I disagree with those who say we bear the image of God only, or even primarily, by living out our faith in our labor. The thought is reductive, and it evidences that we are content to exclude those who will never work, who may never speak, who no longer make or do. Their image-bearing is not dispensable; it is essential. Our dignity may involve our doing, but it is foremost in our very being—our tears and emotions, our bodies lying in the grass, our scabs healing. I try to remember that Eve and Adam bore the image of God before they did anything at all. This is very mysterious to me, and it must be protected.

On the day the world began to die, God became a seamstress. This is the moment in the Bible that I wish we talked about more often. When Eve and Adam eat from the tree, and decay and despair begin to creep in, when they learn to hide from their own bodies, when they learn to hide from each other—no one ever told me the story of a God who kneels and makes clothes out of animal skin for them. I remember many conversations about the doom and consequence imparted by God after humans ate from that tree. I learned of the curses, too, and could maybe even recite them. But no one ever told me of the tenderness of this moment. It makes me question the tone of everything that surrounds it. In the garden, when shame had replaced Eve's and Adam's dignity, God became a seamstress. He took the skin off of his creation to make something that would allow humans to stand in the presence of their maker and one another again. Isn't it strange that God didn't just tell Adam and Eve to come out of hiding and stop being silly, because he's the one who made them and has seen every part of them? He doesn't say that in the story, or at least we do not know if he did. But we do know that God went to great lengths to help them stand unashamed. Sometimes you can't talk someone into believing their

dignity. You do what you can to make a person feel unashamed of themselves, and you hope in time they'll believe in their beauty all on their own.
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People say we are unworthy of salvation. I disagree. Perhaps we are very much worth saving. It seems to me that God is making miracles to free us from the shame that haunts us. Maybe the same hand that made garments for a trembling Adam and Eve is doing everything he can that we might come a little closer. I pray his stitches hold. Our liberation begins with the irrevocable belief that we are worthy to be liberated, that we are worthy of a life that does not degrade us but honors our whole selves. When you believe in your dignity, or at least someone else does, it becomes more difficult to remain content with the bondage with which you have become so acquainted. You begin to wonder what you were meant for.

Ch. 3: Wonder

"Taste and see that the Lord is good" (Psalm 34:8)—The Bible talks of knowing God as though it's closer to dinner and a movie than any three-point sermon. What does it mean that our knowledge of the spiritual is deeply entwined with the sensory? That it is bodily? Double Dutch and the sound of braids and beads clacking together. The soft prickle of grass on bare feet. These are connections that require us to attune ourselves to our bodies.

With The Color Purple, Alice Walker taught me that wonder doesn't dismiss pain; it brings us out of numbness. Celie, a young girl who was told her whole life that she was ugly, learns about the godliness of beauty from Shug, her husband's mistress. Shug tells Celie, "I think it pisses God off if you walk by the color purple in a field somewhere and don't notice it." The story seemed to me more tragic than beautiful. But Walker knew Celie and Shug could not be reduced. Celie's life was more than a grotesque collection of traumas. She learned the language of wonder. And allowing for this awe in her did not diminish the pain of her story, it made her more human.
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To be a human who resembles the divine is to become responsible for the beautiful, for its observance, its protection, and its creation. It is a challenge to believe that this right is ours. Wonder, then, is a force of liberation. It makes sense of what our souls inherently know we were meant for. Every mundane glimpse is salve on a wound, instructions for how to set the bone right again. If you really want to get free, find God on the subway. Find God in the soap bubble. Me? I meet God in the taste of my gramma's chicken. I hear God in the raspy leather of Nina Simone's voice. I see the face of God in the bony teenager bagging my groceries. And why shouldn't I? My faith is held together by wonder—by every defiant commitment to presence and paying attention. I cannot tell you with precision what makes the sun set, but I can tell you how those colors, blurred together, calm my head and change my breath. I will die knowing I lived a faith that changed my breathing. A faith that made me believe I could see air.

Ch. 4: Calling

Have you ever told a lie and then forgot it was a lie? When you tell a story for long enough, you begin to believe it. We adorn ourselves with any number of distractions from self. We embrace mirages in response to cues from the outside that we are not safe, loved, or welcomed. For example, if you have been hurting for long enough, you may find protection in the illusion of bravado or stoicism. Or if you have witnessed a person deemed undesirable for their neediness, you might learn to reject any part of yourself that stirs a memory of them. Haunted, you resolve that you will never be like them, and make vows against needs you do in fact have. The sinister thing about the whole charade is that we seldom find true belonging in a masked or miraged state. Often, it's just the opposite. We don't forget the feeling of our own faces. Any love we receive while wearing the mask only affirms the belief that unmasked, we are indeed unlovable. Our shame is not resolved. It expands. Any affirmation we receive as mirages only keeps our true selves lurking in empty corridors, longing for touch. Illusions of self do not merely make for lonely souls; they make for hated ones. For this reason, the process of knowing the self should be relentless. It will always be worth asking what is really true of us, for each day we live, we do so with deeper longings for acceptance, and the risk of alienation can cause us to dissociate from the truth of ourselves. Would you believe I have known seasons in which even the cadence of my voice has changed so that I might belong to a group of people whose stories and thoughts and ways were never anything like mine? But each year I know love and belonging—a love that doesn't require sacrifice at the altar of acceptance—I become more of who I already am. I am liberated into what Merton calls my "true self." I believe this is my deepest calling. This doesn't mean I won't be called into new things or experience spiritual calls to change or grow. But even with the things I will become, I am called to them because on some deep plane of the soul, they are already true of me. I choose them out of a fidelity to self, not an aspiration toward an idealized self.

I've accepted that the whole of my life will be a pilgrimage toward the sound of the genuine in me. This may sound troubling to those who've been conditioned to believe that our journey is to God and God alone, but I say the two paths are one. My journey to the truth of God cannot be parsed from my journey to the truth of who I am. A fidelity to the true self is a fidelity to truth. I won't apologize for this.

It can be difficult for me now to belong to rooms where people's chief idea of discerning their calling is deciding what job they'll choose. I've spent the past eight years working in Christian spaces within academia, often among people whose primary sense of calling is whether they were meant to be an engineer or a physicist. Defensively, I've found myself silently asking, Do

you think you're the only ones God has "called"? What of the vast majority of the world, which does not have the liberty of making such a discernment? Do the little Black boys running the streets not have callings? And I have never heard a college student tell me they "feel called" to work at McDonald's. I remain very suspicious of this. We cannot talk about work as calling without contending with the fact that there are those who have been denied choice, equity, and dignity in their work.

I had a boss who once suggested, as a part of a conversation on vocation with Cornell students, that we watch a short documentary about custodial staff at various universities. I wonder if he noticed the flash of hope in my face. Or was it desperation? There, strung up like a Black marionette between worlds—one of prestige and career fairs, and one of soft and single Black grammas with little boys who stopped their own dreaming—I was desperate for a synchrony that wouldn't tear me apart. I needed to know that it was, in fact, possible to honor the sacred in our work without creating spiritual hierarchies depending on the kind of labor being performed.

I do resonate with the theology that God is indeed in all things, including our work. To some, this is a novel idea. I play along in their company. But Black people in this country have never known it any other way. The concept of relegating God to church on Sunday is laughable to those whose very lives depend on a God who is with them as they're paying bills, getting pulled over by cops, and further back still, in fields of cotton. Every Black person I know would tell you what it took fancy theologians and philosophers years to articulate: God is in the streets. How boring to spend the whole of my vocational energy trying to figure out if I am choosing the right work. It is of much greater interest to me to talk about how I'm going to do the work with integrity. How am I going to protect dignity as I work? And what truths are calling out to me as I work? You may think we are called to holy things that involve praying on your knees and going to church, and maybe we are. But I haven't known God to regulate holiness. I think they injected it into every bit of everything. And I imagine they are very concerned with every element of life, including our work. And why wouldn't they be?

Ch. 5: Body

I have often wondered if Mary, even with full knowledge and proclamation of the glory of her womb, felt shame for it. As her body changed and belly grew, did she question if it was worthy to hold the divine? Was she embarrassed of the stories her body contained? The weakness, the inflammation, the smell. Or did she see her flesh for what it was—holy? Weak, powerful, human, and holy. For me, the story of God becoming body is only matched by God's submission to the body of a woman. That the creator of the cosmos would choose to rely on an embodied creation. To be grown, fed, delivered—God put faith in a body. In Mary's muscles and hormones, bowels and breasts. And when Christ's body is broken and blood shed, we should hold in mystery that first a woman's body was broken, her blood shed, in order to deliver the hope of the world into the world. We are remarkably material beings. When we speak of bearing

the image of God, I believe no small part of that is a physical bearing. You may have heard it said, “You don’t have a soul. You are a soul. You have a body.” I’m not sure exactly where this notion came from, but the sentiment survives. Many of us, in pursuit of the spiritual, become woefully neglectful of the physical. We concern ourselves with a doctrine of salvation that is oriented around one underlying hope: heaven. And our concepts of heaven are often disembodied—a spiritual goal to transcend the material world eternally. You’ve seen the bumper sticker, slapped crooked on that dusty sedan. It reads: This place is not my home. I don’t know much about heaven, but I have no reason to believe it won’t be made right here. Those faded rose beds will spring up from their graves singing bloody hallelujahs. My gramma’s muumuu will stretch and wrap around the belly of the world, cradling it till it stops crying and everything smells like Shalimar perfume. Who says I’m going anywhere but here? Our tales of Christian escapism lead us to the place where the physical is damned and the immaterial is gloried. Where the only holy things are invisible. How could you expect me to believe this when I’ve met a God who drank from the breast of his creation?

I, too, know the haunting of body become spectacle. When Gerald Wiand leaned in close with a confused expression and told me I looked like a pug dog, no offense, I Googled “pug dog” at free time and by recess had turned against my own face. When your body becomes something consumed or rejected, it is a rejection not just of body but also of soul. Gerald was there three years later when I, the lone Black body in the room, was asked to read a Maya Angelou poem at the front of the class by a teacher who used to call me by another Black girl’s name. And he was there eight years after that when my face was plastered on the backs of thousands of program booklets at the conference of a white-dominated Christian organization. My body as spectacle, as token, has become very familiar to me. There is a feverish cannibalism for Black bodies. I won’t be blamed for what I did to survive it.

Trauma changes the body. Some research suggests it leaves its mark on our genes, a mark that can be inherited from generation to generation. This transference does not altogether surprise me, as I am among those who believe that we are made of our histories, that no part of me is untouched by the glories and traumas that gave birth to me. But a certain helplessness comes over me when I truly consider that I might be affected not only by my present pain but also by the agony of my ancestors. Though I would never wish away my connection to those who endured and resisted violence and exclusion, I have to contend with what their stories are doing to my body. And I tremble to think what parts of my storied blood will flow through the bodies of any children I have. But before it changes the bodies of my children, the trauma of this world will change the body of me. Dutch psychiatrist Bessel van der Kolk writes: Traumatized people chronically feel unsafe inside their bodies: The past is alive in the form of gnawing interior discomfort. Their bodies are constantly bombarded by visceral warning signs, and, in an attempt

to control these processes, they often become expert at ignoring their gut feelings and in numbing awareness of what is played out inside. They learn to hide from their selves.

After dozens of hospitals and hundreds of appointments, I've learned that this world has no commitments to my body. No one will try to understand it more than I will. I learned the necessity not only of listening to your own body but also of fighting for it.
When the burning and twitching came, I learned man will never sit still long enough to watch for them. And when the rashes came, I learned man will never search my skin for as long as I need him to. We are poorly attuned to one another's bodies. It is a latent evil. To know your own body is a spiritual care and protection. To know the body of another is a spiritual union and conciliation. We must become so acquainted with the physical good that when evil, affliction, sickness, and pain come, we can name them with the urgency they demand. These hands may move, but not the way my hands move. There are times when this sacred fidelity to self—fully embodied soul-self—may keep us from death itself. The disease alienated me from my body before it alienated me from others. I slept flat on my back for a whole year. I promise you I never rolled over, not once. Terrified of my body, of its pain, I would lie in bed all day, reading and writing and watching documentaries that enhanced my intellectual ego. If I could not have my body, I thought, at least I would have my mind. I do not hold this against myself, but I do regret the love I stole from my body when it so desperately needed it. When our bodies feel small to us, we do what we can to expand our dignity elsewhere. I'm learning to befriend my body again. It does not always move the way I want it to, but I have made a commitment that if it ceases to move at all, if I lose all control and agency, if my hands go numb in the night and never wake again, even still I will not forsake my body. To be people capable of extending welcome to the body, even those bodies the world discards and demeans, is to be people of profound liberation. By this we will know our faith: We will stay whole.

It is queer and beautiful that some of us belong to a God who tells us to consume his body and blood in remembrance. What do the body and blood have to do with memory? How do they connect us to the story of liberation? It means something that the Eucharist, this lasting ritual of the presence and memory of God, is a physical nourishment as much as it is spiritual. I once went to a church that gave everyone a whole slice of bread and they actually buttered it. It felt wrong, but they had something so right. I love that we don't just bow to the bread, we eat it—the body of God entering our bodies. And I think God's supposed to taste good. That we have managed to regurgitate a Christian spirituality that is anything less than bodily glory, agony, healing, and restoration is our tragedy. I don't think it an accident that we are made to remember God through an act that nourishes us in our own bodies. I've heard much of bodily sacrifice, of taking up a cross, of dying and dying again. But I need to hear of resurrection—of the bodily

love of receiving the Eucharist. You want to tell me to love God? Ask me when I've last eaten. Come now, you want me to tell you a prayer? You'll find it in the blood beating from heart to head to toe and home again. Don't ask me of salvation. Listen to the hum of my chest as I now fall asleep. I cannot see the face of God by rejecting my own.

Ch. 6: Belonging

Long, long ago, when all the earth was still as silence, the moon got all choked up on the beauty of the stars. She coughed and then wind was born. The wind rushed out with such a force she didn't even know where she came from at all. She started roaming and searching, darting through trees and trying to wrap herself around anything she could find. No matter what she did, it was as if she was invisible. She wanted to rest in something, but no place would have her. Whenever she became really desperate, she would rend herself into cold and hot air and collide with herself. This, of course, made a tornado of her. So she would thrash through places with an ugliness, picking everything up and forcing it to be held by her, even if just for a little while. Until one day, God was in the garden making something like their own image, and they saw her, and their heart went out to her. And so God inhaled a little bit of her and blew it right into the breast of the image. The wind went on searching and remains very lonely to this day—only every once in a while, when she passes by a human or caresses a cheek on a summer day, the wind God put in you and me will stir and recognize herself for a moment. And those tiny moments of being seen, of being felt, collect like a hope in her, carrying her through her loneliness to this day. We were made for belonging. I don't need a verse in Genesis to tell me that it is not good for one to be alone. Not always.

I do join the scores of others who have said that, in more ways than one, the flourishing of a healthy community lies in the ability of its parts to be solitary. Our pining for belonging can do frenetic things to the soul. We can become so desperate for connection that we make havoc from all the hungry parts of ourselves. It makes us restless. It can make us consume others instead of embrace them. Maybe we habitually ignore the boundaries of a friend because we fear absence will end in abandonment. Or we make unhealthy demands of relationships to satisfy our own insecurities, desperate for affirmation. Solitude can be a profound teacher. It can teach us how to hold ourselves—how to affirm ourselves and listen. How much is the sound of your own voice worth? And yet, we were made for belonging. Maybe you've heard it said that you need to learn how to be alone before you can be with someone. I say you have to learn how to be with and a part of something in order to know how to be alone. I think it is only out of a deep anchoring in community that one can ever be free to explore the solitary.

When I write community, I mean to say any group of people that is committed to being a collective. I currently live in a small, predominantly white lake town. So when I'm at the farmer's

market and I look up and see another brown-skinned face staring back at me, a mystery stretches out between us. We nod and know that the wind in us has stirred—that we have known enough of the same things to feel like we are made of the same thing. With one look, we commune. And we breathe. We remember our Blackness holds us together, and we are held.

A community can mean a household, a local body, a shared identity that stretches across the globe. But it also can mean a group that knows your name, people who know you and know about the ugly parts of you and stay.

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Dietrich Bonhoeffer writes, “In a Christian community everything depends upon whether each individual is an indispensable link in a chain. Only when even the smallest link is securely interlocked is the chain unbreakable. A community which allows unemployed members to exist within it will perish.” When he uses the word “unemployed,” I don’t believe Bonhoeffer is talking about employment in the economic sense but rather as a fostering of purpose. He meant that each part of a community would have agency to affect the whole, in whatever way that may be—that the community’s survival would depend on each link. I have a friend who calls this mutuality, the truth that says, We don’t just welcome you or accept you; we need you. We are insufficient without you. One part’s absence renders the whole impoverished in some way, even if the whole didn’t previously apprehend it. In mutuality, belonging is both a gift received and a gift given. There is comfort in being welcomed, but there is dignity in knowing that your arrival just shifted a group toward deeper wholeness.

People talk about God as three distinct people in one. If this is true, it means the whole cosmos is predicated on a diverse and holy community. And if we bear the image of God, that means we bear the image of a multitude. And that to bear the image of God in its fullness, we need each other. Maybe every culture, every household, every community bears that image in a unique way.

I wonder if God feels as alienated from us as we do from him. Sometimes, it cracks me up to think of the stories that describe Christ just boldly inviting himself over to people’s houses for dinner. Roaming around telling people to stop everything and follow him. Multiplying food, but making everyone sit down in groups to eat it. He knew how to make his own belonging. Do we?

Ch. 7: Fear

I'm told the most frequent command from God in the Bible is Do not fear. Some have interpreted this as an indictment on those who are afraid, as if to say fear signifies a less robust faith. This offends me. God is not criticizing us for being afraid in a world haunted by so many terrors and traumas. I hear Don't be afraid and hope that it is not a command not to fear but rather the nurturing voice of a God drawing near to our trembling. I hear those words and imagine God in all tenderness cradling her creation against her breast. Perhaps it is not the indictment of God we are sensing but our own souls turned against themselves. I wouldn't dare criticize Christ in the garden—sweating, crying, pleading for God to let the cup pass from him. This is a Christ who knew fear deeply. And if God himself has been afraid, I have to believe he is tender with our own fear.

What I skipped over in the psalm she was referencing time and time again is the sacred praxis it begins with. The psalmist says, "He makes me lie down in green pastures; he leads me beside still waters." I find it beautiful that in the face of terror, God doesn't bid us toward courage as we might perceive it. Instead, he draws us toward fear's essential sister, rest—a sister who is not meant to replace fear but to exist together in tension and harmony with it. For fear's origin is not evil, though evil certainly wields it against our souls daily.
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There is a fear that leans more toward awe than terror. A kind of delight. Your gut plummets within you as you drop from a bungee cord. The drum of a heart turning corners in a corn maze. I believe fear has the holy potential to draw out awe in us. To lead us into deeper patterns of protection and trust. To mold us into people engaged in the unknown, capable of making mystery of it instead of terror.

Ch. 8: Lament

You can't tell me that it doesn't change everything that the one who created all things and holds together all things cried. If Christ wept for Lazarus, he must've done so not out of an absence of hope or faith, but out of love. It was an honoring. When we weep for the conditions of this world, we become truth-tellers in its defense. People who can say, This is not good. It is not well. People who have seen the face of goodness and refuse to call good and curse by the same name.
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There is no such thing as a lone wail. Every howl reverberates off the walls of God's chest and finds its way back to us, carrying his own tears with it. And when God bears witness to our suffering, it is not for his consumption or to demonstrate something. My gramma used to wonder what this all was teaching her, a rhetoric she absorbed from the church. But it seems cruel to believe that God would require grief to make a truth known. I refuse to believe we need to dissect our pain in search of purpose. Sometimes shit is just shit. It's okay to say so. I think when God bears witness to our lament, we discover that we are not calling out to a teacher but inviting God as a nurturer—a mother who hears her child crying in the night. She wakes, rises,

and comes to the place where we lie. She rushes her holy warmth against our flesh and says, I'm here.

Lament is not anti-hope. It's not even a stepping-stone to hope. Lament itself is a form of hope. It's an innate awareness that what is should not be. As if something is written on our hearts that tells us exactly what we are meant for, and whenever confronted with something contrary to this, we experience a crumbling. And in the rubble, we say, God, you promised. We ask, Why? And how could we experience such a devastation if we were not on some mysterious plane, hoping for something different. Our hope can be only as deep as our lament is. And our lament as deep as our hope. Now there is a distinction to be made between true lament and the more sinister form of sadness we know as despair. Despair is lament emptied of hope. It is a shell that invites the whole of your soul to dwell in its void. Many of us will visit this shell, but despair depends upon our staying. With no framework for healthy lament, I was a prisoner to sadness.

Even still, it's not good to drag someone from their lament out of fear of despair. In fact, being forced too quickly out of lament can drag the soul into despair in secret. We are left to wander in sadness but without a confidant to help guide us out of the void.

We will not heal divorced from our emotions. A spirituality that depends on positivity will lead not only to emotional fallacies but also eventually to delusions of all kinds. Hundreds of thousands of people can march for miles declaring Black Lives Matter, and you will find it so disruptive to your delusion of positivity that you will not become curious or sensitive. Instead, you will find yourself defensive of the fallacy. You can listen to the story of someone's depression, and your instinct will be to find silver linings so that you yourself feel some kind of resolve. People whose faiths are predicated on happiness make for dangerous friends and woefully disconnected fellow humans.

Sometimes denial of pain is born of self-preservation. In bearing witness to sadness, you may find yourself confronted with questions like *Who is responsible? Am I to blame? What are you saying about my grandfather?* Our histories, stories, and sins render us so defensive of our delusions of good selves that we are unable to see the tears of another clearly. This can function on the communal level, too, as entire countries convince themselves of a positive hero image, drowning out the cries of those around the world with anthems and stories of the nation's greatness. The church is not exempt from this.

At some point, you must ask yourself, are you so committed to the delusion of positivity that you will stand by unmoved as those who bear the image of God cry out in pain? Will you walk past the tears of Christ, pretending not to notice? Or worse, will you tell him to get up from the linoleum floor and hope in God?

Sometimes I think that if some Christians stopped talking about escaping a someday hell and started bearing witness to the hellish conditions of life and the world at present, they'd see a lot more people in their churches come Sunday. When I watch somebody name what should not be and earnestly question God about it, I immediately become a fraction of the skeptic I am. Lament is a very compelling apologetic.

I don't know if I've encountered better emotional truth-telling than when visiting Black churches. Black people of faith know how to wail. And they know how to crack up. I once watched a preacher start dancing as he prayed. His voice was shaky and syncopated. A

runaway child had returned, and everyone was howling and celebrating. But as the prayer went on, he ran out of breath and just started crying and softly beating his fist to chest. When the music stopped, his fist was still beating, and everyone mirrored him as the room quieted. It felt pure to me. If there was any performance in it, it was the kind of art that is for healing and not for consumption. When it's not being consumed, Black lament is something to behold. Some churches know how to shake the numbness from your flesh.

A Black woman I admire once drew me into a line from Jeremiah 9:20 that says, "Hear, O women…teach to your daughters a dirge, and each to her neighbor a lament." When she told me this, two things occurred to me. The first: Lament is intergenerational. The second: It is something that can be taught.

"When I moved to Philly after college, my first friends were a group of nuns. I was leading small groups at a quaint Catholic university, and Sister June, worried that I was lonely but never saying so, would invite me for meals and rosary walks. I went with her a handful of times to a prayer labyrinth that she walked weekly. The first time I went, I thought it would be a maze. I was hoping it would be. But prayer labyrinths aren't meant to trap you, and the goal isn't to get out; it's a journey to the center and back again, and the way is long but clear. It's an ancient practice of embodied meditation. Sister June would mumble to herself as we walked the path from different ends. I'd pick leaves and rip them up into smaller and smaller pieces as I made my way. Sometimes, when Sister June approached the center, she'd begin to cry. I'd linger awkwardly in places to avoid the center while her mumbles became a gentle wailing.

But one time, she just peeked over her shoulder at me and said, Well, come on, then. I entered the center with her, and she slid a photo from her skirt pocket and pressed it flat between her two palms without showing me. My sister, she said, and she wasn't wiping her tears away. I asked, Older or younger? And maybe she knew I just didn't know what else to say, because instead of answering, she said, I come here to cry for her. And then, Let me tell you about her. We walked the path out together as she told me about their love and the loss and how she once and still sometimes hated God. She told me that as she walks to the center she travels into sadness. As she walks out, she reminds herself that she isn't imprisoned by it.

We are born knowing how to cry, but it takes another to teach us how to cry well and with purpose. As we watch our elders cry, we are learning. Sister June taught me how to grieve with my body. She taught me how to feel the tears on my face and not wipe them away. Her rhythm of lament has settled into my soul.At Wisewood, we're collecting stones now to make a prayer labyrinth in the field next to the house.

I walk the path and whisper to myself, *You are no shell.* I make the pilgrimage into my deepest sorrows, knowing tragedy doesn't own me. *Your wails are worthy to be heard.* Journey to the center with me now; together, we won't get lost in despair. Your wails are worthy to be heard.

Aren't your eyelids
Tired of keeping

Prisoners? Those tears
Are precious
Minerals. Lap them up
Like a medicine—
It's called healing.

Ch. 9: Rage

"In the classroom that morning, with the only light emanating from the face of a battered child, I learned what white anger does. What rage must it take to pulverize a child? In demonic fury, to try to crush the image of God in a person? If you can look at what they did to him and feel nothing, you are not numb, you are dead.

And what inner death does it take to allow your own guilt to torment someone else's grief? Far too many people are incapable of bearing witness to someone else's emotions without centering their own. Interestingly enough, I never heard the brunette beast question the anger that would stir those white devils to destroy the face of a child. It was not their anger that disrupted her consciousness, but mine. We should think about this."

It should be no secret that Black anger has been demonized by a white-dominated society — white Christianity playing no small part in the subjugation. We are told that the pinnacle of piety is **niceness**, and we are shamed out of conflict, protest, advocacy. We can cry but not too loud, our agony never allowed to disrupt the illusion of unity. I like that God doesn't play or talk nice to the hands of injustice. What freedom it is to witness a God whose primary concern is not for how he makes the oppressor feel, but for feeling alongside the oppressed, and telling the truth about it. For so long, Black people, noosed and muzzled, have not been permitted the liberty to tell the truth about the evil we've endured. And now, the language of niceness—and more recently, civility—serves to muzzle us further.

There is an evil absurdity in this. I can name very few instances (none, arguably) of a niceness in God, and yet this is the demand the oppressor will always make of us. Make no mistake, this is not for our spiritual growth or formation; it is to protect the fragility of the oppressor, who knows that as we unleash the truth of our anger, their conscience and persona will be implicated. Not everyone is prepared for these truths. Audre Lorde said, "I cannot hide my anger to spare you guilt, nor hurt feelings…. Guilt is not a response to anger; it is a response to one's own actions or lack of action. If it leads to change then it can be useful, since it is then no longer guilt but the beginning of knowledge." The anger of Black people is the undeserved gift of knowledge. I have no interest in protecting the ignorance of the violent. The most appropriate response to my rage should perhaps be gratitude.

Still, the embrace of my own anger remains complicated. No matter how many emotions I allow someone to bear witness to, I know I will be reduced to anger. For the majority of my life, this has led me to suffocate myself. I learned how to seem calm. Composure became

my most treasured mask. I learned to coddle the egos of those who do great harm. I learned, as Dickinson says, how to “tell all the truth but tell it slant.” And most gravely, I learned to never, ever flip the table.

I cast my anger so far out of my own body that for a long time, it forgot how to stomp or scream or throw. On the occasion that I muster enough courage to participate in conflict, I empty it of all emotion. I talk plain and monotone, becoming more machine than human. In time, I have realized my expression of anger is so limited, so chained, that it has actually become less true.

James Baldwin said, “People who shut their eyes to reality simply invite their own destruction, and anyone who insists on remaining in a state of innocence long after that innocence is dead turns himself into a monster.” I’m not convinced we can tell the truth alienated from the truth of our emotion. They are necessary company. Sometimes, however threatening it may be, it is seeing the face of anger that can finally shake a people out of their numbness, out of their inner death.

I’ve determined I will no longer settle for mere articulation of anger. I want to feel my voice shake and the warmth creep up my spine.

Growing up on Cemetery Lane, my gramma inhaled bible stories as an escape. Chile, I grew up on Spam and Daniel and the lion’s den. Her favorite thing to draw was Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego in the fiery furnace. Until one day it occurred to her: If God can do all that, why couldn’t he protect her knees from going raw when she was forced by the woman to kneel on rice and recite the scriptures from memory for hours? Why didn’t he double the soup and bread at dinner so she could double Dutch without feeling faint? And why couldn’t he protect her from the man who was not her father? *And if he don’t care, why don’t he just let me die already?* Her belief in the existence of God was durable, which did not reduce her anger but enlarged it.

She left that Seventh-day Adventist school and the church, and tried to leave God himself, but found herself tethered to him by rage. A mercy she did not readily comprehend. But in the end, it is much easier to locate love in rage than in apathy. Apathy is a giving up, a surrendering to what is. And it’s inherently a disconnecting force. It moves you away from a person. Rage comes for you. It is inherently relational. It might come with fire, but it’s still moving toward something, and in proximity, there is hope for reconnection. In this way, anger itself is a function of reconciliation. It is a bringing together. And it was anger’s sacred bond that kept my gramma near to her God.

When we speak of anger, it is important to recognize its praxis as manifold, each expression capable of sacredness in its own right. This may be overly simplistic, but I tend to classify anger practices as interior or exterior. Interior anger is expressed plainly and held unconditionally between you and God. This is cursing the hands that hang the noose. It’s dreaming about revenge against those who once hurt you. Exterior anger is made public for others to bear witness to and even be moved by. A crowd of ten thousand marches to the cry of *I can’t breathe. Hands up, don’t shoot. I can’t breathe*.

I remember when I first read the psalmist begging God to break the teeth of his enemies in their mouths. I couldn’t believe all the priests and pastors in my life got away with never mentioning this. Anger expressed in the interior life is permitted to exist in its rawest and most honest form.

It is not kept private out of shame or because it is inferior in status to public anger. Rather, its privacy grants us the freedom to understand our rage without pressure or compulsion to dilute it. It gives us the space to be laid bare and have our anger, like any emotion, refined in the presence of the divine.

If you read the psalms, you'll find no small number of them committed to rage. Calling for a creditor to seize money from the oppressors, begging for bones to be broken, enemies to be wiped out, their descendants punished. These imprecatory psalms were a liberation to me because they finally told me the truth—that is, I belong to a God capable of holding the ugliest parts of my anger. I never prayed the same again. To be permitted an anger that is imperfect, that tells the truth about the revenge and terror I crave for those who do harm, allows me to see things in myself that might otherwise go unnoticed. So often our wounds are invisible to or neglected by the world, and our anger must be hidden in order to belong or survive. It is very important that our belonging before God not depend upon our ability to hide or extinguish truths in and about us. We must trust that our maker can look on our rage, and even our hatred, and perceive those stories, fears, and vulnerabilities that reside in us and have stirred us toward our present emotional expression. As we allow God to behold our rage, a sacred intimacy emerges.

"Exterior anger is often in defense of some sphere, person, or piece of creation. Demanding Amazon be held accountable for its environmental impact; interrupting the man who interrupted the woman midthought in a meeting. Anger is never holier than when it acts in defense of the dignity of a person or piece of creation. But it requires we be more measured and protective of our words—not so that we censor ourselves on behalf of the fragile and defensive, but so that we will be heard by those we wish to be heard by. You can be a person of profound anger without allowing it to eclipse your or anyone else's personhood.

But there are times when anger devolves into something more desperate—a hatred that delights in death. My gramma said, Anger is one thing, but justifiable anger…you gotta be careful with this. Because you got every right to hate them. When anger is justified, it can feel as though when your anger swells, so does justice. This is a danger, for it's very difficult to distinguish rage from hatred. And hatred, which can still be a holy thing if directed toward evils and not creation, is also very fragile. It is difficult to contain it to where it's meant to be.

"White anger is something else. It can spit on a kid and still appear victim enough to have someone else thrown off the bus. White rage, like all rage born not in defense of dignity but in defense of oppressive power, is manipulative. It is one of many examples of the difference between anger that dominates and anger that liberates. …

Anger that dominates relies on fear tactics and abuse to live. It makes no demand of the world except that it bow. This is often because it fears being ruled or overpowered itself. This is no excuse. Holy anger is that which liberates. It marches, chants, and flips tables, demanding wrong be called by its rightful name. It is both passion and calculation, longing for more but for the sake of justice and dignity.

…

Our liberation depends on our ability to unlearn the lies told about our own anger. Those who tell the lie are afraid of a world where the oppressed are grounded in their anger—where they recognize their subjugation and believe fully, in their bodies, in private and in public, this is not okay.

Ch. 10: Justice

“True justice has little concern for good and bad, and is much more interested in protecting and affirming dignity with tangible actions and repair.

You might think justice is a form of choosing sides, choosing whom to stand behind. In a way, maybe it is. But justice doesn’t choose whose dignity is superior. It upholds the dignity of all those involved, no matter whom it offends or what it costs. Even when demanding retribution, justice does not demean the offender’s dignity; it affirms it. It communicates that what has been done is not what the offender was made for. They, too, were made for beauty. In justice, everyone becomes more human, everyone bears the image of the divine. Justice does not ask us to choose.

For me, there is no liberation without justice. They are not the same, but they depend on one another. An enslaved person, while they are enslaved, will never know justice. Just because the master lets you live in the house doesn’t make you any freer. In these cases, it is not justice that is being granted but aid—often born of the guilt of the captor. Make no mistake, if you are not free, it is not justice. I do not celebrate crumbs when I know of the bread that has been promised to me.

I think about how God didn’t just rescue Moses and his people from Pharaoh; he sent plagues until Pharaoh agreed, and when Pharaoh reneged, he drowned an army in the sea. The freedom of God’s people did not occur in a vacuum. There were consequences. There was truth-telling. And there was a disturbingly costly justice. There could be no liberation without it.

In Genesis, when God gives Eve and Adam authority over creation, it is not permission to do whatever they want; it’s an honoring. It’s permission to be the mouth and hands of justice, protectors of every created thing. Over time we’ve taken this role to look more like domination than cultivation. Instead of resting the land, we overharvest it, we exhaust it. Instead of marveling at the tree, we make plans for its utility. We are a people much more concerned with ruling than loving. This is a mistake that positions us in places where we are no longer close enough to another person or thing to perceive its pain or need. To be human in an aching world is to know our dignity and become people who safeguard the dignity of everything around us.

To protect everything may seem like too great a call. But we will not survive without it. Everything should be called by its name.

So let justice roll down and twist and juke like a movement. Let it march into your bones, into seas of charred cane. Wash the earth in justice and watch what rises to the surface. Curses can’t breathe underwater.

Ch. 11: Repair

“Call it archaic, but I think confession is liberation. It is easy to think that in injustice only the oppressed have their freedom to gain. In truth, the liberation of the oppressor is also at stake. Whether it’s the privilege we’ve inherited or space we’ve stolen, what began as guilt will mutate into shame, which is much more sinister and decidedly heavier on the soul. It doesn’t just weigh on the heart; it slithers into the gap of every joint, making everything swollen and tender. We learn to walk differently in order to carry the shame, but then we become prone to manipulate things like nearness and connection just to relieve our own swelling.

When wounders, finally becoming exhausted of their dominion, dismantle their delusion of heroism or victimhood and begin to tell the truth of their offense, a sacred rest becomes available to them. You are no longer fighting to suspend the delusion of self. You can just lie down and be in your own flawed skin. And as you rest, the conscience you were born with slowly begins to regenerate, and your mobility changes. You walk past the shattered porch light without your nose to the ground. You can look your father in the eyes. You realize there are other ways to move in the world. It’s not only relief, it’s freedom.

“Truth-telling is critical to repair. But confession alone—which tends to serve the confessor more than the oppressed—will never be enough. Reparations are required. To expect repair without some kind of remittance would be injustice doubled. What has been stolen must be returned. This is not vengeance, it’s restoration.

“Reconciliation is so elusive because so few ever occupy a state of sincere remorse. If we are to be reconciled, the offender must become disturbed by the state of their soul—a contrition that births apology not for the sake of its own forgiveness but to honor the dignity that was once at risk.

When you’re little, apologies of I’m sorry—or worse still, Sorry—are accepted as enough. It trains us for the wrong thing. A few years ago, I reached the conclusion that I will no longer accept an unspecific apology for specific wrongs. If you cut me, I want you to apologize with grave specificity for the blood running down my back. And I want you to describe what in you made you do it. When you gain the courage to look at me, I want your soul to writhe like it was the back of God that was cut. This would make any sorry truer.”

“You wouldn’t know it from our photos, but I spent two days of that trip in bed, my only consolation the pain au chocolat and espresso my husband would race back to me multiple times a day, his eyelids dragging with sadness. I was alone in bed that second afternoon when I began to pray aloud. Praying doesn’t encapsulate it—I was begging. Flat on my back in the sheets, talking to the ceiling like it had a face. I never begged or bargained so desperately in my life.

I was not healed.

But in those desperate utterings, I saw things I didn't even know lived inside me. I saw the profound hatred for a body that was only doing its best to survive. Don't make me live with these fucking legs. If you just free me from these hands…I had turned against myself. Once I heard it out loud with such venom, I became suddenly very sorry. And a realization came awake in me: **My body was not the bondage.**

"I lay there in stillness, and like the ancient ritual that precedes the Eucharist, I traveled around myself and passed the peace. I made peace with my eyes, feeling my eyelashes flutter against the back side of my hand. I made peace with my legs, flexing at the ankle and feeling where it hurt. With my trembling hands, and shallow breath. Peace. And I cried a different kind of tears. What once was enemy became the object of my affection and protection.

It felt like a vow.

I don't know if liberation depends on our reconciliation with others, but I am certain it at least depends on our reconciliation with ourselves. In this life, it is all we can do to stay whole—an interior unity. We owe that to ourselves.

The most beautiful thing about the human body to me is regeneration. To stave off the holes in my eyes, the doctor shoots lasers at my retinas to create burns around the edges. And as my eyes heal, the retinas, which they're worried will detach altogether, are welded down to stop the tear. It sounded barbaric to me at first. But as that bright light seared into my eyes, I marveled at my regenerative powers.

We are a people whose flesh grows back. It does not die quietly. We must remember this, even in the most painful conditions of our healing."

Ch. 12: Rest

It seems like anytime God is talking about salvation in the Bible, he makes a point to name rest. "I'll refresh tired bodies" (Jeremiah 31:25, MSG). "Find rest for your souls" (Matthew 11:29). And, in Psalm 23:2, we have "He makes me lie down." What a peculiar answer to the valley of the shadow of death. You might expect God's response to be to have people rise, to empower them to fight. But God's answer is unapologetic care for the body. The deepest yet most neglected of needs.

What does it mean that in response to the terrors of the world, God would have us lie down? To eat? To drink from still waters? The most enduring yet undermined sentiment of evangelism: "Come to me all you that are weary…and I will give you rest" (Matthew 11:28).

"Once possessed, we must steady ourselves habitually in order to see the way we were meant to. For some, stillness will not suffice. The stillness must mature into an inner quiet—the noise of the exterior world ricocheting off your flesh. To cultivate habits of rest, we must discern what

noise has found a way to penetrate our soul. And as we detect patterns and modes, we have more of a grounding as we resist restlessness.

In this way, **the silence of God, which is so often mistaken for abandonment**, may be a gift to those of us who cannot steady our souls in the vibrations of the world's clangor. It's a liberation from a world that demands too much of our minds and bodies and whose noise does not relent."

"Rest is not the reward of our liberation, nor something we lay hold of once we are free. It is the path that delivers us there."

"And it is the specter of scarcity that withholds the rest we have been made for, the paradox being that what feels so much like risk is actually the means of restoration. We sleep and we regenerate. Our cells begin a sacred rhythm of repair and release. And when we wake, we are more healed, more whole, less inflamed, more aware. And, of course, we sleep that we might dream. A balm made of mystery, and it has been kept from so many of us.
…"some of us have come to expect exhaustion and enslavement from every soul we collide with. We become used to it, we participate in it, and then we become reckless demanders ourselves.

God, in Christ, learned something of this incessant demand. In one of the gospels, Jesus wakes up at daybreak just to go out to find a place to exhale alone for a bit. The crowds go and hunt him down, and they're clinging to him, begging him to not leave again. Jesus puts them all in check, as if to say, Don't you know I have other things going on? You are keeping me from my purpose.

If Christ walked away, so can I.

I sometimes wonder what willpower, what fidelity to rest and waiting it must've taken for God, knowing he had all the capacity and strength to heal every person in every crowd, to walk away. At first it seemed nearly callous, but it liberates me as I create boundaries in my own life.

I see the longing and despair all around me, and I think of Christ, lying in the boat with his head on a pillow while the waves toss their craft around. Everyone is frantic, thinking death itself has come for them, and the creator of the universe is fast asleep. Glory.

Sometimes the appropriate response to desperation is to do the unthinkable. Close your eyes."

"Activist and theologian Tricia Hersey says, "This is literally life or death. It's the matter of whether or not we're going to stop and listen and slow down and reclaim our bodies." She says "to not rest is really being violent toward your body, to align yourself with a system that says your body doesn't belong to you, keep working, you are simply a tool for our production." But this violence has come to be celebrated and rewarded. And now we demand as much from one another as what has been demanded of us.
We are seldom impressed by simplicity, unless it is the kind inflated with theatrics, which inevitably draws attention to itself—capsule wardrobes, minimalism, van life—and still is, in a

manner, doing. But we fall on our knees at the sight of a man working sixty hours a week for his law firm in the city. We are in awe of the violence.

And we conflate these idols with God himself. We become obsessed with the language of how God might "use" us, never pausing to ask ourselves, What if God doesn't always want to use you? What if sometimes God just wants to be with you? We've become estranged from this idea. We would never articulate it as such, but undergirding much of our concept of calling is the belief that our primary relationship to God is anchored in transaction. God resists this.

People think the sabbath is antiquated; I think it will save us from ourselves. When God tells the Israelites to practice rest, he uses the memory of their bondage to awaken them to what could be. "Remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the Lord your God brought you out from there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm; therefore, the Lord your God commanded you to keep the sabbath day" (Deuteronomy 5:15).

When we rest, we do so in memory of rest denied. We receive what has been withheld from ourselves and our ancestors. And our present respite draws us into a remembrance of those who were not permitted it. Hersey says that "our dream space has been stolen, that there has been a theft, a complete theft. What could have happened if our ancestors had a space to rest, if they were allowed to dream?" When I rest my eyes, I meet those ancestors and they meet me, as time itself blurs between us. They tell me to sit back. They tell me to breathe. They tell me to walk away like they couldn't.

"Rest is an act of defiance, and it cannot be predicated on apology. It's the audacity to face the demands of this world and proclaim, We will not be owned.

We will not return to the chains that once held us. They are brittle and tarnished from our tears, which made the flood. Remember. You were never meant to prove your dignity. You, whose flesh contains more bodies than your own. You don't belong in the catacombs of restlessness, wandering from death to death. Lie down with me in the pasture, where life is alive and growing with the unapologetic slowness of a blade of grass. What will become of us?

We will be free and we will be dreaming."

Ch. 13: Joy

"Joy, which once felt as frivolous as love to me, has become a central virtue in my spirituality. I am convinced that if we are to survive the wait of justice and liberation, we must become people capable of delight. And people who have been delighted in.

Some of us go our whole lives without ever being—or rather, knowing that we are—truly enjoyed by a person. We can become cynical about communal affirmation, hoping that our affirmation of self will suffice. We try to meet our self-hatred with the sound of our own voice, because this, for whatever reason, is seen as a superior strength. **But I think we were**

made to be delighted in. And I think it takes just as much strength to believe someone's joy about you as it does to muster it all on your own. We shouldn't need to choose self-affirmation at the expense of the affirmation of another. I think we were meant for both. We need both a personal and a communal praxis that actively resists our self-hatred. Sometimes we must declare peace and tenderness over our own bodies. But sometimes we need the sound of another's voice to celebrate us. Joy plays no small part in that.

"There is so much that is worthy of lament, of rage. Joy doesn't preclude these emotional habits—it invites them. Joy situates every emotion within itself. It grounds them so that one isn't overindulged while the others lie starving. Joy doesn't replace any emotion; it holds them all and keeps any one of them from swallowing us whole. Society has failed to understand this. When it tells us to find joy in suffering, it is telling us to let it go, to move on, to smile through it. But joy says, Hold on to your sorrow. It can rest safely here."

"I once heard that joy and happiness do different things to the body. Happiness, which works itself out in the sympathetic nervous system, makes you excitable and energetic. It's important but fleeting, grounded in the immediacy of a moment or the whim of a feeling. Joy is more tranquil. It has to do with the parasympathetic nervous system, and it's much more about peace than vibrancy."

"There's a moment in the Bible when the temple of God, which was destroyed during the exile, is being rebuilt. The Israelites lay the foundations, and a lot of the people begin shouting for joy. But many of the elders, those who had known the former temple, wept. They remembered what was. Ezra says, "No one could distinguish the sound of the shouts of joy from the sound of weeping, because the people made so much noise. And the sound was heard far away" (Ezra 3:13, NIV).

I have not found a better portrait of joy. Sorrow and celebration all mixing together in a holy cacophony. A collective so loud that weeping and laughter were made one. A sound so loud that it was heard by others, even those far away."

Ch. 14: Memory

"People say in heaven we won't remember any of the sorrow anymore. I hope they're wrong. It would be a disingenuous eternity to exist without all that has made me. I hope when God brings heaven down, they bring with them the storytelling circles of old—that we would all gather around the fire listening to the ancestors, singing familiar songs.

I don't want to make it to the promised land if it means I forget the wilderness."

“Memory is meant to be given. It isn’t held well alone. It is meant to be held in a collective and across generations. Memories that remain exclusive to a particular individual or even community are at risk of becoming false. The smell of lavender becomes the smell of grass. The abduction of Black bodies becomes their “migration.” When memory endures no scrutiny or curiosity or challenge from the exterior, it can lead to a profound loneliness at best; at worst, individual or collective delusion.

There are many instances when memory is unable to be held on to. By age or trauma or lack of revisiting, we can lose track of our own stories.

…

“When my friend’s father, who has Alzheimer’s, forgets a face or loses his place in time, I have always found it so tender that my friend does not immediately correct him. Sometimes, he’ll just stay with his father in whatever memory he is able to occupy. This is solidarity. Other times he’ll choose one or two details to bring into focus at a time: You’re a good dad. You make the best French toast. Memory is frail. It requires a delicate touch, a tenderness.

Even those of us who are not prone to forgetting need this. Sometimes, it is only in the hands of another that a memory can be fully encountered. All of a sudden it is not the front of the car you see but the street from the back side window. The memory expands past two dimensions. This is the beauty of collective memory.

Collective memory requires that we piece together the fragments of individual memory and behold something not necessarily larger but with greater depth and color. I think the whole Bible is predicated on collective remembrance. You have feast and fast days, storytelling, and most conspicuously, the Eucharist. A shared table and a shared loaf. Take, eat, drink. The Christian story hinges on a ceremony of communal remembrance. This should train us toward an embodied memory. My hand on a ballet barre, and every muscle knows how to come awake again. My father takes up my detangled hair in his hands, and his fingers dip and twist so fast they blur and become one. Do this in remembrance of me.

“In many spaces, to foster collective memory well, we must habitually ask ourselves, Whose story gets told, whose story is believed, and who gets to tell it? If we surrender our individual egos, these questions can function as a pruning process, as we contend with accounts that don’t line up quite flush. This interrogation may reveal false memories.

…

The truest memory is rarely the one that survives. In most of our contexts, intellectual, charismatic, white, heterosexual, cisgender men will carry some weight subconsciously as keepers of the history. It is important to name this tendency, for it has been systemically ingrained in us by societies that value their wealthiest, most visible, or most power-possessing members.

Theologian Miroslav Volf once said, “I think the truthfulness of remembering is part and parcel of **the justice of remembering**…. Why do we need to remember truthfully? Because every untruthful memory is an unjust memory, especially when it concerns relationships, fraught relationships of violence between people.” In this way, communal storytelling can be an act of justice.

And we must examine how we choose our historians. The story of how the community selected its first leader will be decidedly distinct depending on the vantage point of the historian. When the role is shared by a diversity of voices, the process of curating stories becomes truer and more just. And when practiced well and often, this habit of curating collective memory can not only preserve community but also, in the darkest of moments, resurrect it.

“Hagar’s story reminds me of the profound healing that can occur when someone is given the liberty to have their story held, their suffering named. To belong to a God who asks, Where have you come from?

Maybe God knows the paths we’ve walked, but there is glory and healing in watching it fall from our own lips, in our own words. We must relearn to embody a holy story exchange. Memory is not just to be held but to be told—and this is especially true in a world where we are so often refused the right to tell our own stories. Part of the power of remembrance is in its recitation. When we lose someone, one of the things we’re asked to do in grief counseling is to tell what the person was like, to tell a memory of them. It doesn’t matter that the counselor has likely never known the person; there is healing in the telling.

Ch. 15: Liberation

There will always be people who are threatened by freedom in another person. Who have something to gain from our bondage.

And there are also voices who deeply love us but are unable to exist in the tension of who we are and what we believe and who they desire us to be and what they desire for our beliefs. This is the life of a human, particularly a human with any concern for belonging or survival—we are dragged with such a force in so many disparate directions that our souls, disoriented, are unable to find their way back to center. And for most of us, the journey back is costly.

“In spirituality, this leads many of us to profess beliefs that we do not truly believe. Like when I told a cabin full of campers that if they confess their sins and believe in Jesus, they’ll be saved from hell, when really I don’t know what hell is or if I’m going or if I’ve been. Or when Dae tells me she likes girls and I sit in silence instead of saying, *Me too*, and it’s terrifying, but if there is a God, I hope he loves us not despite this but because of this.

Many of us end up surrendering a spirituality that allows us to be curious and uncertain and free so that we can maintain some semblance of belonging, even if that means we adhere to a way of life that doesn’t leave room for the truth of us.

Whenever I become uncertain of which direction liberation lies in, I ask myself to tell the truth. Not that I am capable of comprehending what any ultimate Truth is. But I am capable of at least telling the truth about what I believe to be true—my inmost convictions, desires, or even an embodied revelation. The truth that rattles in my bones.

There is no greater exhaustion than a charade of spirituality.

A life that is holy is a life that allows for all of your uncertainties, your curiosities and unbelief. That doesn't just allow for them but holds them as sacred. Spirituality that is not permitted these liberties is merely subjugation. It is not in protection of the divine; it is in protection of fragile people who are unable to allow spiritual freedoms without their own spirituality feeling threatened. It's a spirituality that is terrified of meditation for fear of resembling another faith tradition. It's a spirituality that spends more time on apologetics than conversation and telling stories.

To be liberated spiritually is to commune with and seek God without fear of alienation if we do not reach the same conclusions as our neighbor. It is to become spiritual creatives.

Who are we that we would demand certainty or clarity of mystery?

In too many spaces, we've become suspicious of beliefs that leave room for the unknowable. If uncertainty is permitted, it is permitted around carefully defined points of interest. Like Communion. Or mortality. There is rarely room for new uncertainty. If one person is certain about a thing, it demands, either in agreement or disagreement, a certainty (or feigned certainty) from all others).

"I think we can be fully free yet still have the capacity to become more free. Maybe this is heaven."

"Author bell hooks said, "Women's liberationists, white and black, will always be at odds with one another as long as our idea of liberation is based on having the power white men have. For that power denies unity, denies common connections, and is inherently divisive."

In pursuit of liberation, we do not need to pine after the power of our oppressor; we have to long for our own power to be fully realized. We don't want to steal and dominate someone else's land; we want agency in reclaiming and establishing our own spaces. We don't want to silence the voices of our enemies; we want to be able to safely center our own voices and be believed. Liberation recognizes that I won't get free by anyone else's bondage."

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Cole Arthur Riley