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Advancing Black Youth Justice and Healing through Contemplative Practices and African Spiritual Wisdom

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Enduring constructs of inequity seem to perpetually devalue Black youth, casting them as insignificant and disposable. Critical contemplative pedagogy can help us disrupt the damaging narratives and systems that impede youth thriving, while also awakening us to a deeper knowing of justice. In this reflective essay, I offer a reimagining of Black youth through the use of contemplative practices and West African cultural wisdom.

INTRODUCTION

I recall the horrendous day when we learned that 17-year-old Trayvon Martin had been fatally shot by George Zimmerman in Sanford, Florida. I had recently begun teaching full time in my alma mater's undergraduate sociology program, and as the news filtered through the classes and the department, a somber rage began to arise. Although we were miles away from the site of the tragedy and had no real connection to Martin or Sanford, Florida, the mood among our predominantly Black faculty and student body was palpable. We were angry, we were hurt, and we were confused. Another young Black life had been tragically brought to an end. Since that fateful day in 2012, there have been a series of killings or suspicious deaths of Black youth and adults from various walks of life. Some of the cases, like those of Tamir Rice, Philando Castile, Eric Garner, Sandra Bland, and Rekia Boyd, receive national notoriety. Yet other tragedies are less well known, like the case of Terrence Sterling, my 31-year-old neighbor, who was pursued and fatally shot by police on September 11, 2016 as he rode a motorcycle without a helmet in Washington, D.C.

As a Black mother, educator, and activist, I, like many others, continue to grapple with the seeming assault on Black life.

As a professor of criminal justice at an urban, four-year land-grant institution, most of my students are Black, and many come from neighborhoods that are over-policed and under-resourced. My courses, which focus primarily on youth justice and youth development, offer an historical and theoretical framework for experiences that many of my students have already lived and/or witnessed in their families and communities. I attempt to offer my students an interdisciplinary perspective integrating scholarship from various disciplines such as anthropology, sociology, social work, urban studies, history, psychology, and human development. As such, I try to help students understand these tragedies, not as isolated incidents of misfortune, but rather as part of a larger “constellation” of institutional and historical racism and trauma that continues today and too often leads to the premature death or lack of thriving of Black youth (King, 2018). What messages do Black youth internalize as they see people who look like them as perpetual targets of violence in the media? In my view, such tragic cases exemplify the continued devaluation of Black lives in American society. Racial disparities in the achievement gap, school suspension rates, and incarceration rates continue to signal the historically rooted reality of the expendability of Black lives. This essay is concerned with fostering healing from the cumulative impact of direct and vicarious violence upon the bodies, minds, and spirits of Black youth themselves. I believe that contemplative approaches can support us in repairing centuries of racial harm and transforming our society into one that is truly equitable and just. Yet, they require a social justice lens and culturally relevant substance to be impactful.

I utilize mindfulness and contemplative approaches in my instruction to support student self-awareness, deepen learning, and build community. Having experienced the personal benefits of meditation and other spiritually based contemplative practices, I began to introduce secular practices into the college classroom to bring students more fully into their educational experience; to help them better manage the stress that often accompanies college-going endeavors; and to help provide tools for healing from the myriad forms of trauma they may have experienced in their lives. These practices also model healthy, empowered approach-

es that students can carry into their careers in criminal justice, social work, education, and counseling. When shared responsibly and ethically, contemplative practices can support students as they get in touch with the pain they may be carrying and come to understand how it might impact the quality of service they render to Black youth and their families. Further, the first-person awareness that contemplative approaches cultivate is also essential in helping us realize the inner resilience, creativity, and wisdom that we can bring to our interpersonal relationships and the communities we serve professionally.

RACE AND THE REALITY OF BLACK YOUTH LIFE IN AMERICA

Disturbingly, society's negative perceptions of Black children begin to form shortly after they begin school. One study showed that Black boys as young as ten may not be viewed in the same light of childhood innocence as their White peers but are instead more likely to be mistaken as older, be perceived as guilty, and face police violence if accused of a crime. Researchers tested 176 mostly White male police officers from largely urban areas to determine their levels of bias, and found that they overestimated the age of Black boys by 4.5 years. The researchers found evidence that overestimating age and culpability based on racial difference was linked to dehumanization stereotypes, a particular kind of bias distinct from prejudice. They also found that unconscious dehumanization of Blacks was closely linked to police officers' violent encounters with Black children in custody (Goff et al., 2014). The same study also involved 264 mostly White, female undergraduate students from large public universities in the United States who were asked to rate the innocence of people ranging from infancy to twenty-five years old who were Black, White, or an unidentified race; the students judged children up to nine years old as equally innocent regardless of race but considered Black children significantly less innocent than other children in every age group beginning at age 10 (Goff et al., 2014).

A 2016 study conducted by researchers at the Yale Child Study Center used eye-tracking technology to identify whom preschool teachers focused on when told to look for troubling student behavior. White teachers were shown to focus on Black boys 42% of the time as compared to 4% for White boys. Sadly, this stereotyping was done not only

by White teachers but by Black teachers as well, who perhaps had also internalized the cultural narrative of the threat of Black boys (Gilliam et al., 2016).

According to the U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights (2014), Black children are three times more likely to be suspended from preschool than White children, and although they account for about 19% of all preschoolers, they constitute nearly half (48%) of all preschool suspensions. These statistics suggest that a negative racial narrative about Black children develops early and persists throughout a Black child's educational life, as demonstrated by the racial disparities that exist in K-12 education and Black children's overrepresentation in special-education courses. Suspension from school sets the stage for a range of other problems such as repeated suspensions, youth disconnectedness from school, and poor academic performance due to missed instruction. These factors often lead to youth dropping out of school, which is heavily correlated with delinquency and other behaviors that increase youth's likelihood of involvement in the juvenile and criminal justice system—another domain in which Black youth, particularly Black males, are overrepresented.

The racial disparities resulting in this overrepresentation of Black youth in nearly every sector of the juvenile justice system have been well documented. The W. Haywood Burns Institute for Justice, Fairness, and Equity estimates that while the overall rate of incarceration for all youth has steadily decreased by 55% since 1997, the rate of incarceration for Black, Latino, and Native American youth has continued to rise; in 2013, Black youth were incarcerated at a rate four times that of White youth for similar offenses (Burns Institute, 2016, p. 1). These statistics highlight the racialized nature of the youth justice system:

Youth of color are more likely to be arrested, prosecuted, sentenced, and incarcerated for typical youth behaviors than are their White peers. Racially inequitable policies that were imbedded into the earliest incarnations of our justice systems have influence which youth are valued, which are neglected and which are more likely to be deemed criminals. More than 100 years since the youth justice system was founded in this country, vast disparities in system involvement between youth of color and White youth persist. (Burns Institute, 2016, p. 1)

The social conditioning of viewing Black children as problematic is ubiquitous and transcends gender. In her illuminating work, Morris (2016) illustrates the ways in which Black girls are misread, ignored, and pushed out of schools and into vulnerability and victimization. Morris reports girls being suspended for truancy, uniform violations, or challenging teachers' normalized notions of female gender identity grounded in a White feminine construct. She even shares cases in which Black girls have been suspended for wearing cornrows and other natural Black hairstyles or because teachers and school administrators did not approve of how their bodies looked in school uniforms. A study conducted by Epstein and Blake (2017) showed that Black girls between the ages of 5 and 14 were seen as older than their White peers and less in need of nurturing and protection. Such disturbing realities amplify the need to center racial socialization in education and youth-development efforts.

As we confront these trends with direct social justice action and juvenile justice reform, so too must we tend to the spirit of Black youth. Researchers have noted the negative impact of racial bias upon Black youth, which often leads to increased levels of stress and depression, thereby compromising overall health and well-being (Brown & Tylka, 2010; Stevens, 2006). Our youth need to receive constant affirmative messages about their value, their goodness, and their possibilities. They need our compassion as they learn to be self-compassionate. We must deliver messages and tools of restoration to counter the narrative that suggests the irrelevance of Black life. Given the hostile conditions under which many Black youth live, our neighborhoods, our classrooms, our therapeutic offices, and our very interactions must be spaces of healing and restoration. Yet this requires that educators and others who work with youth must constantly tend to or own healing needs, so as not to perpetuate harm or oppression upon those we seek to help liberate and heal (hooks, 1994).

MINDFULNESS, CONTEMPLATION, AND AFRICAN SPIRITUAL WISDOM

Contemplative pedagogy can be defined as the integration of introspective, reflective exercises into a teaching and learning environment for the purpose of deepening learning, fostering connection, and increasing

personal and social awareness. The contemplative movement in higher education has experienced tremendous growth in the past twenty years, and practices are currently being offered on college campuses around the nation and the globe (Barbezat & Bush, 2014). Contemplative practices have allowed me to infuse my spiritual values into my work, welcoming silence, reflection, deeper connections, and yielding to a larger body of wisdom and internal knowing. These practices, I believe, can support us in creating spaces for healing, restoration, and justice within the academy, spaces that are sorely needed for everyone—students, faculty, staff, and administrators. I also use contemplative approaches in my instruction to deepen learning, build community among my students, promote restoration and self-care, and help keep my students connected to their own humanity and internal sense of goodness, which is particularly important since a great deal of our course material exposes the victimization of Black, Latino, and Native American youth, as well as other marginalized groups. Our racially oppressive society constantly casts Black youth as dangerous threats and disposable beings. Youth internalize this narrative in conscious and unconscious ways (DeGruy, 2005). Thus, we must remind them to see themselves truthfully, authentically, and powerfully. How can contemplative approaches help us reimagine Black youth and how can these practices help Black youth reimagine themselves, not as enemies or objects but as human beings? A glimpse into West African spiritual and cultural wisdom may prove enlightening.

My travels to West Africa and the Caribbean and my initiation into the Ifá/Orisha spiritual system constitute seminal events in my contemplative journey. My personal healing journey has served as the impetus for creating a pedagogy that is holistic and nurturing and centered on social justice. That journey began with my initial trip to the Gambia, West Africa, in 1993.¹ In connecting the dots retrospectively, I now see how my time there was preparation for my initiation into the Yoruba priesthood, even though the Gambia is a predominantly Muslim country. It was there that I began to learn a deeper level of presence, silence, and a

1 I speak about the significance of this healing journey in the TEDx talk I delivered at Bergen Community College in 2016. You may view it at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G0gf8zLlJKw&t=6s>.)

quality of being that transcends material status. I began to connect with nature—the ocean, earth, trees, and people—in a way that was regenerative. I visited marabouts who interpreted my dreams and gave me herbal medicines and spiritual “black water” for my protection. It was there that I cultivated a deeper sense of awareness than I had ever known existed. And it was to the Gambia that I would return each year between 1993 and 1998, to teach and work with youth and become more spiritually and culturally grounded. The late author and scholar Alex Haley (1976) traced his family lineage to Jufureh village in the Gambia, which he chronicled in his best-selling book *Roots: The Saga of an American Family*. In a similar way, I found a spiritual home in the Gambia, for it was there that my soul had become awakened and I could behold a wonder about life that I had not possessed before.

I have been a practitioner of the Ifá religious system for 21 years. Often referred to as the Yoruba religion or the Orisha religion, Ifá is the traditional belief system practiced by the Yoruba people in the area that is now the southwestern region of Nigeria. Versions of this indigenous religious system are currently practiced by millions of devotees throughout the African Diaspora (Brazil, Cuba, Puerto Rico, Trinidad, and the United States) and in various other parts of the world. Although I grew up in a Black Baptist church, I began to explore other religious systems during my college days. As an anthropology student, I was intrigued by the way other societies perceived and connected to the nonphysical world. I longed for a spiritual expression that connected me more deeply to African culture. In 1998, after a period of intense spiritual awakening, I underwent initiation ceremonies for the Yoruba priesthood.

Unfortunately, traditional or indigenous African religious systems have been heavily maligned and misrepresented within Western culture. However, I have found great healing and spiritual liberation in the Yoruba religious system, and it has brought to my life a greater sense of stability and purpose. That purpose is directly centered around protecting and liberating the minds of Black youth and enabling them to see their beauty, strength, and power. This is particularly essential in a society that consistently offers Black youth messages to the contrary. As I endeavor to share empowering contemplative practices with my students, Ori and Ase are concepts that I find particularly relevant for my work, as they provide me with a frame of reference that speaks to the sacredness of Black youth.

Ori² is a foundational component of the Ifá/Orisha faith. The literal translation of Ori is *head*, like the actual physical head of a human or animal. In Yoruba traditional belief, one's head is believed to be sacred because it houses the seat of consciousness, also called Ori (Oladele, 2007; Petty, 2016). According to Yoruba ontology, each individual, while still a spirit, chooses their Ori (destiny or life path) before being born. Ori can be thought of as a personal god or spirit that supports the individual as they journey through life. Practitioners in the Ifá/Orisha faith regularly propitiate their Ori with prayer and ritual offerings. Orisha devotees are encouraged to begin each day by placing their hands on their head and praying to the Ori by expressing gratitude for its existence and requesting guidance and blessings for the day. This, in essence, is an appellation to the divinity within one's self. Another concept, Ase, refers to the spark of divinity within each living being that has the capacity to manifest what one desires—it is the ability to make things happen. The concept of Ase allows Yoruba practitioners to understand that they are empowered to make positive conditions occur in their lives based on how they view challenges and use their Ase, their spark of divinity from the Supreme Creator Olodumare.

In the Ifá religion, the binary elements of hot and cool are frequently used as a way to describe the energy or intensity of different elements such as herbs, people, and life conditions. Things are considered hot when they contain an active, fiery energy that must be well-managed so as not to create an imbalance or an unwanted outcome. Conversely, coolness suggests a calmer, steadier, yet no less intense or powerful energy. With respect to the Ori, it is wise to keep it cool. This is akin to the American saying of “keep a cool head,” suggesting that when one is too angry, or agitated, one's actions may result in an undesirable outcome. Thus, devotees are encouraged, for the most part, to keep a cool temperament so that we can make beneficial decisions for our lives. This concept also works in tandem with other aspects of the Ifá system to support the development of *iwa pele* (good or gentle character), which

2 It should be noted that the Ifá and Orisha religious tradition is vast and complex. Yoruba cosmology and mythology contain ideas that are not easily translated into English or a Western context. I abbreviate my discussion of them here not to disrespect the tradition but to honor the constraints of space and brevity.

can be loosely interpreted as possessing and practicing the qualities of sound judgment, fairness, humility, interdependence, and creativity, among other attributes. I am grateful for the teachings of the Ifá/Orisha belief system that have allowed me to approach my own healing and resilience—and to support that of my students—from a place of power and cultural relevance.

As I integrate mindfulness and contemplative practices into my teaching and service, I see it as supporting the work of Ori and Ase, which involves helping young people learn how to still themselves to connect with a deeper sense of who they are, one that is grounded in compassion, love, and African wisdom. From that solid grounding, students can begin to heal from the traumas of the past to help themselves create positive changes in their personal lives, families, and communities. I do this work because it is essential that Black youth learn to connect to a deeper sense of purpose. Central to their survival, they must *use their heads* to make wise decisions and keep themselves safe in an often unsafe world. In the next section I explain some of the practices I offer in my classes, such as the Vision Board exercise, loving-kindness meditation, and the Black Youth Visualization practice, to help Black begin to youth actualize healing, restoration, and power.

MEDITATION AND VISION BOARD EXERCISE

The Meditation and Vision Board exercise is a staple activity in my Criminal Justice practicum course, which students usually take in their junior or senior year. In this exercise, students are allowed to create aspirational artwork using colorful poster board, images and text from magazines, poems, affirmations, and copies of personal photos and mementos. The purpose of this exercise is to help students cultivate positive energy around their soon-ending college experience and the future that awaits them beyond it. The assignment is also a wonderful way to teach students the power of setting intentions and visualizing positive futures for themselves.

The assignment begins with a guided visualization. After settling in with a few deep breaths, students are asked to visualize their graduation day. They are invited to bring to mind the faces of all the family members and friends who have supported them through the higher education

journey. They are encouraged to consider the many ways in which they received support from others in the form of childcare, cooked meals, or financial assistance. They are invited to express silent gratitude for the tutor who helped them write a paper, the partner who took on extra domestic duties or a second job to help pay their tuition, or the supervisor who allowed them to leave work early so they could get to class on time. Students are invited to settle into feelings of accomplishment and pride as they imagine their supporters clapping and cheering for them. This exercise is offered to help students tap into gratitude and appreciation for their support network, no matter how small or seemingly insignificant. In the second part of the visualization, students imagine the lives they desire after college, creating the most vivid mental images possible of their future careers and lifestyles.

Following the visualization, students use magazine pictures, personal photos, affirmation statements, stickers, markers, and pens, to create a vision board reflecting their mental images. I stress to them that the exercise is not an art competition but a chance for them to express their creativity. Although students may bring in magazines, I also keep an assortment among my supplies, being sure to include some with diverse images of Blacks and other people of color. They work with chatter, laughter, and sometimes music underneath them. After 30 minutes or so, each student shares their board with the class, telling the fuller story of the text and images they have chosen. Sometimes we collectively gaze at the images in silence, as if at an art gallery. Students are allowed a few moments to step back and reflect on their creation to determine if it conveys what they intended. Each student is allotted 5–7 minutes to talk about their board with the class. In addition to the expected images of cars, homes, and glamorous models, students also include images that represent perseverance, overcoming obstacles, religious beliefs, travel, and family. They include article headings and pictures of people engaged in a range of professions. The boards often serve as a catalyst for deeper stories behind their motivations for pursuing careers in criminal justice.

The exercise allows students to build community and explore how they want to contribute to the world through their careers in a creative and engaging manner. The vision boards also allow them another contemplative tool they can utilize outside of school. I encourage students

to keep their vision boards at home so they can add more items throughout the semester, though they more often take cellphone photos of them and leave them in my office to retrieve later. The final part of the exercise is a reflective writing practice that students submit within 48 hours of “completing” their boards. Students often share in these essays that the exercise is fun, emotional, deep, and insightful.

LOVING-KINDNESS MEDITATION

Two years ago, I began offering a weekly Mindful Monday session on my campus. In this shared community space, faculty, staff, and students can “drop in” for all or part of a 50-minute mindfulness class. There is no registration required and the class is offered in our student wellness center’s fitness studio, which hosts an abundance of natural light, mirrors, and a sound system. Typically, practices include a basic breathing practice, silent meditation, jazz meditation, and loving-kindness practice, in which, as students sit in a comfortable position and connect to their breathing, I invite them to silently repeat a variation of the following phrases to themselves: May I Be Safe/May I Be Healthy/May I Feel Good About Myself/May I Be Happy/May I Be Peaceful. I consider it particularly gratifying to offer this practice to my mostly nontraditional, Black, Latino, first-generation, working-class students, who may have internalized messages of inferiority from the broader culture (Berila, 2016; King, 2018). I often have students pair up and discuss what it feels like to engage in this practice; for some, it is their first time centering thoughts of well-being around themselves.

After directing the phrases at ourselves, we then offer them as a gift to others (someone whom we know and get along with, someone we don’t know very well, and someone who may be going through a difficult time). This practice serves as an ideal opportunity for exploring deeper healing and well-being for my students, many of whom are balancing multiple jobs, family obligations, and the daily demands of life as they pursue their college degrees. It can also illuminate the degree to which they engage in negative self-talk and lack self-compassion. Further, it is a powerful way to introduce a deeper investigation into the historical, structural, institutional, and personal impediments to well-being for the communities from which many of my students emerge and which they will serve. At the start of a session, students are always made aware of

campus counseling services, in the event that the practices trigger some unresolved trauma that requires professional support.

Some of my students have shared their experiences attending the Mindful Monday sessions. A 30-year-old junior psychology student reflects:

Before I started Mindful Mondays, I must admit that I was a bit scattered and really hard on myself, which wasn't allowing me to be the best me. Since attending the sessions, I feel like I have a better hold on my emotions and understanding why I'm feeling that way. The sessions [have] also taught me to show gratitude whenever you can. Most importantly these sessions have shown me how to love *on* myself unconditionally. I have been more aware of how I treat myself, and it's a wonderful feeling.

This student goes on to share her intention to continue practicing mindfulness and sharing it with others:

In practicing mindfulness, my hope is that I will be able to lead these practices and be able to share it with as many people as possible. I believe practicing mindfulness gives us the power to be aware and present, and I think it's really needed as times change.

Another offers her perspective on how mindfulness supports her mental and physical wellness:

Since I have been practicing on Mondays I have been more aware of my mind, body, and surroundings. I have learned to focus my mind on the positives and things that can be changed instead all the negativity I'm constantly surrounded by. Mindfulness has also made me more aware of what I eat and be more active in my daily routine. I love how at peace I feel after a session or on my own time. I recommend teaching mindfulness to everyone at any age.

A 24-year-old Black male who works as a counselor in the city school system shares his concerns about Black youth and how he works to maintain his own sense of well-being:

[As] a Black counselor from D.C. I am constantly bombarded with [the] suffering of my people. Empathically, I deeply feel the emotions of young Brown kids searching for people to let them be great and validate their narratives. While I help others I struggle to find ways to care for myself.

Mindfulness has brought me peace and understanding. To me practicing mindfulness is about being aware and attentive, controlling your reactions, showing gratitude, being true to what you experience and feel, and knowing you have the power to control your situation. Mindfulness is a working practice: there is no competition, no awards, it's about evaluating how you feel, and creating the best you [that] you can be.

Finally, an evening student who works and attends school full-time offers her thoughts on engaging in a practice before class:

I've never meditated a day in my life. The exercise was truly weird, however, when the instructor began walking us through the exercise, it was a great help. She instructed us on what to focus in on, what to think about and repeatedly told us to relax our muscles. I never realized how tight my face was until I was told to relax the muscles and I began to see the difference.

The mindfulness approaches before classes were definitely stress relievers and allowed the class to run more smoothly for me. College can be tough and going into instruction with a relaxed mind assisted me with positive intake. The practice has supported me through that specific class and even at home, although the exercises were more effective for me with a group of people focusing in

on the same exercise. I now use the technique from time to time and I have created my own way of focusing in on the present moment and accepting it. It helps to reduce stress and contributes to [my] happiness.

These student reflections serve as encouraging testimonies to the benefits of mindfulness and encourage the exploration of other contemplative approaches for the university community.

THE BLACK YOUTH VISUALIZATION

Perhaps the most powerful tool I offer my students is the Black Youth Visualization practice, where they are asked to hold a Black youth in their mind's eye and cultivate the grandest future imaginable for them. I invite them to fill in the details vividly in their mind, factoring in the strengths, special skills, and characteristics of that youth. I then ask them to consider how they, from their own positionality, might contribute to the actualization of that vision through their work as teachers, mentors, family or community members, or criminal justice professionals.

I also offer this practice when I conduct presentations for faculty in higher education, as a means of inviting a deeper exploration into the negative biases that are often embedded into their assumptions about and encounters with Black youth. I invite participants to consider how they might support the vision they have created for a Black youth from a non-oppressive, decolonial stance. This might include making a commitment to undertaking deeper study of the racial socialization process, challenging racist comments when they are made, or even financially supporting an organization's work with Black youth. My hope is that faculty, White and Black, will lean more courageously into the injustice that too often shapes Black youths' lives and opportunities. This practice is not intended to invite a savior mentality but to begin engaging in a process that is long overdue and central to our dismantling of racism, internalized inferiority, and oppression. A detailed description of the practice is included in the Appendix.

CONCLUSION

Research on school-based mindfulness programs for Black youth shows promising results in reducing students' levels of anxiety, stress, and negative rumination, as well as supporting their ability to self-regulate and manage their behavior (Bluth et al., 2015; Mendelson, 2015). Studies of Black adult populations also demonstrate that mindfulness, when adapted to be more culturally relevant, may be useful in supporting healthy racial socialization and moderating the effects of racism and racial bias (Woods-Giscombé & Gaylord, 2014). I believe that mindfulness and contemplative practices, especially when grounded in social justice and cultural relevance, can help Black youth remember their inherent value and cultivate their inner resilience. Additionally, contemplative practices, if adopted by educators, parents, and community members, might also serve as helpful resources for actively challenging the legacies of racial injustice by inviting us to deeply see and question our behaviors. Given the intense level of work required to save our youth from suspension, expulsion, unemployment, incarceration, and death, we must engage in practices to sustain ourselves in the important work ahead. Combined with our social justice activism, these practices may support us as we reimagine Black youth, restore ourselves, and help to dismantle racial injustice.

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APPENDIX

A BLACK YOUTH VISUALIZATION PRACTICE

by **Michelle C. Chatman, Ph.D.**

This practice invites you to become aware of the images, thoughts, and bodily sensations that arise when you hold a Black youth as part of your contemplative gaze, as the focus of your contemplative exercise. I invite you to notice what thoughts or questions arise as you bring a Black youth to mind. After the practice, I invite you to work with that information—question it more, peel back the layers so you may begin the process of arriving at an understanding of your views.

Prepare

Sit upright in a comfortable seat, but not rigid. Place your feet firmly on the floor and feel a sense of groundedness and stability. With your hands placed gently on your lap or in a position that is comfortable, lower your eyes to an unfocused gaze. If you are comfortable doing so, close your eyes.

Breathe

Take a few deep cleansing breaths to clear your mind a bit. Inhale through your nose, expanding the belly with air. Breathe out slowly through your mouth. Relax your facial muscles, brow, and shoulders with each breath. Allow yourself to become more centered with each breath.

Visualize

Bring to your mind's eye the image of a Black child or youth. It may be a youth that you know personally or, if you do not know of one personally, a youth you have seen on television or social media. Who is this child or youth? From where do you know them? What are they wearing? Who are they with?

Spend a moment creating the **grandest vision** you can for that Black child or youth. What are they doing? What is their demeanor? Are they happy? Are they confident? Are they safe? Are they being cared for? What are they contributing to society? Where is your proximity to that young person's success? Are you a mentor, a guide, an advocate, parent, coach, a teacher, an onlooker? Notice how difficult or easy this task is for you and be curious about it.

Question

What is it like to intentionally hold a Black youth in your contemplative gaze? Is it uncomfortable? How would you characterize the experience of creating a grand vision for a Black youth? Was it challenging, intriguing, curious, or effortless? What kind of images did you have to sort through in order to get to the grand vision?

Share

Take 10 minutes to share with a partner what you envisioned. If you did this visualization alone, spend ten minutes drawing your visualization or writing about it. Reflect upon the narratives that inform how you see, understand, and interact with Black youth. Consider how you might use your resources (social network, time, skills, and financial resources) to actually support the grand vision of a Black youth that you created.

