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I'm the Only One Who Can Do It: Healing My Very Own Black Body through Contemplative Practice

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Written in a combination of prose and poetry, this paper captures my journey to healing and healthy well-being. As a Black woman tenured professor who is also a mother of three Black girls, a wife to a Black man, I am full. And so, I have to make space to see my own self clearly. Each day as a Black woman, I have to set the intention to save my own life. In this selection, I bring to the page my experiences with contemplative body work and energy practices and capture my practice for survival, greater self-knowing and the desire for so much more joy.

An Opening: On Moss and the Heart

Just the other day I was talking with my neighbor. She's in her early nineties and has an immaculate garden. While I was standing in her lovely Easter basket colored green grass—far enough away for safety but in range for her hearing aid to be useful—she said, "I've got to get that moss out." Looking down I saw its spread in places she didn't like; it being a complete ruin, in her mind. I immediately became more attuned to the amount of space it was taking up.

It's not even wanted, I thought. I imagined in a few weeks when the weather lifted I would see her sitting on a crate another neighbor gifted her with, bent over, scraping up all that moss territory. At least it comes up easy ... given its multitude.

On my walk home I began to make parallels between the mightiness of moss and the weight of grief. Both lay on so heavy and thick. Some type of effort, some type of scraping over is required to get it out of the way. A process has to happen to make room for the things you really want to flourish, to bloom.

A bit later this poem came:

“When Verdant Isn’t Good”

Colonies of moss — clumps of hurt all joined tightly
taking over the topography of my heart
Each and every ventricle, kinda struggling for air
Strangled

My neighbor lost her husband a few years ago and is still grieving. And me? Well, my story is really about the release of the strangle. Of grief.

On Being Released from the Strangle: Working the Contemplative Practice

Admittedly, I struggle with consistency in my own healing. As a mother of three Black girls, a wife to a Black man, I am full. I have to make space to see my own self clearly. Each day as a Black woman, I have to set the intention to save my own life. And yet, I often come dangerously close to my own edges serving myself the very least and the very last. When I had pneumonia a few years ago, I lay on the couch curled up worried I might be dying. I wrote:

“Poem for the Day”

Dammit, if I hold the space
for one more person today
That isn’t Myself.
I just might die.

And later in the day, I wrote,

Life. Hard.
Sick again.
Tending to folk, helping them along.
Need. Balance.
My body is refusing to pretend.
It needs Love. Time. Rest.

Poetry always mirrors back a truth. For the last several years I have been struggling with lots of pain in my body that I am sure has been imprinted from my own trauma, things still unspoken in my family amongst three generations of women, and regular 'ole consistent racism. To manage the pain, I go for body work—Thai massage, Korean scrubs. I go for Reiki energy work; and I've even become a Reiki practitioner. I meditate and seek truths in nature. These forms of healing, which I consider contemplative, create a bubbling sensation. Things come up, need to be reflected on. They literally spill out.

So—I write poetry about it. It's my contemplative practice and it's often facilitated by body and energy work.

I know for sure that my body has been holding on to many-a lesson. I know for double-sure that they get tougher and tougher to process when I don't study. My body-teacher is sterner now, less forgiving. In fact, I am convinced that it's raising the threshold; there's so much more discomfort. I am having to approach learning these particular lessons with the same tenacity that I had when I was in high school and worried I might fail my math Regents exam, yet again. I had to figure it out with the quickness—if I didn't pass it, guess what? I wouldn't graduate. I audited Mrs. Sales' class for a year, going daily trying to figure out a language that didn't seem my own.

Now, I'm having to do the same thing except I'm my own teacher and the student, too, of a language that *is* my very own. My biggest discoveries, no longer latent: One, there's absolutely no outside human source greater than me. Two, I, in fact, have the best data on my body. Three, while someone else might complement what I know about my own body, they absolutely cannot trump my deep knowing.

It didn't occur to me straight away that at the heart of healing my body is acknowledging my own self's deep grief. And when that clarity came I realized I was being shown over and over my particular role and my particular pathway to healing tight hips, a super cranky shoulder that sends pain down my arm numbing my fingertips, a constricted throat ...

In both "Poem for the Day ... after Tui Na massage" and "Poem for the Day ... after the Korean Scrub" I reflect not just on the locus of the pain or its connection to emotion but how it lingers:

“Poem for the Day...after Tui Na massage”

And this is what I was thinking....
When she jimmied down on that
nerve/ my whole life broke open.

I cried for all that pain,
Thinking
about how tired it must be

....

“Poem for the Day...after the Korean Scrub”

If you thought there’s no room for
your Heart to hold any more
sadness/ just you wait.

It spills over into your skin cells
down there by the left ankle, on
the side of the arm/
Back of neck.

Remains.

I guess it’s not a curious thing, the type of hands-on body work I’ve been drawn to. The kind that hungrily scrapes over all the moss leaving me all the way bare, inviting me in to see myself whole, open. Mostly it’s painful in a—my body is writhing around all over the place—kind of way; it requires a lot of breath. I mean *a lot*. I often have to be reminded to breathe and sometimes I can get in a rhythm by riding the healer’s breath.

Once I lay on a table with vibrating acupuncture needles on my back body. Even with the language difference, I could make out: “It’s so sad. You are so young. So much pain.” In both “for hanifa” and “poem for three days” I show myself glimpses of the role I must play in my own healing. Unquestionably, I gotta be engaged.

“for hanifa, it’s about the throat chakra--”

the core of her whole self said to me:

she'd have to exorcise
me the way a Black mother of
three girls with natural hair
tends to her bathtub drain.

We will go in Deep and pull that Shit out.

....

"poem for three days"

1.

I figure it's because I can't seem to
cry out of my throat or release from my eyes
that my hips are taking on the
Task.

--begging to be de-numbered

2.

In my head I see myself
racing -- scrambled
around, mind outside.

Trying to pick up this, put
down that--
realizing I'm not getting at what matters.

I know I gotta tell you this
before I run out of time.

I don't even know if I'm trying to
save my life any more.

--win-win for the hungry brain/so damn busy

3.

After I wrote that,
I could cry--
In an instant
Tears stuck in every slowly moving hobble
Being let out.
Then--

I heard her.

My grandma, whose stinky and
Stiff body I been living in.

She said, “Brandi Leigh, you’re giving up... You didn’t listen
when I came before.”

And, she was/is right.

--is this why you’re here?

I can’t keep pooping out, my body is telling me. I am pissed for coming in dead last, it shouts. My own self-study has captured the changes over time: the pain is no longer invisible to others but literally my whole gait, how I get out of the bed, bend down to rub my marijuana infused oil into the sides of my knees—all of that is noticeable. I’ve got all kinds of external marks and if I want to pass *my own* damn class this time, some loving-kindness consistency is due.

A deep dive pouring into me.

On Contemplation

My discoveries have been jammed packed with the tough and the rough. My journey to healing has brought me face to face with the fact that I have inherited my grandmother’s body. I guess unknowingly I’ve been preparing for this moment for lots of my young girl life. I spent many a-summer in North Carolina with my grandparents. I had lots of time to get to know her body and didn’t even know how useful it would be to me. Peering up close almost eye to eye, I’d tweeze gray hairs out of her chain. When she washed the dishes I noticed how she placed the weight of her body on her right hip; sometimes there was a lazy shift to the left but the body was never straight ahead with a neutral spine and pelvis. I watched her body settle in and take up the expanse of the chair as we sat underneath a shade tree, eating tomatoes from the garden with Lawry’s seasoning salt. How would I have known then the value of that data?

The ways in which our stories ripple together forming a similar body. It’s so similar, it sometimes feels uncanny. All of a sudden, it seems,

I have an arthritic type of walk that was Desmonia's very own. The way she would brace herself just as she was about to stand up. "Shew shew shew," she said, almost like a whistle. I sound like her now. I've taken on her body to learn my own.

Healing happening immersion style.

I continue to learn through contemplative practice that how I have been living is just not working out anymore. Holding on to stories of personal, generational and ancestral abuse—because I don't think I can share them—is squeezing me out. I've got grief running up and down my nerve endings.

"You teach best what you most need to learn" is the instruction from a quote that I love the most. I am not sure where I read it or even who said it, but its impact has been long lasting. I teach courses in the English department at a state university. One of the things I find myself doing in my course on Black Women Writers is talking about the value of breaking the culture of silence and authorizing one's self. We talk about the systems that are in place that make this difficult for the Black women protagonists. And when we see the power that comes from a breakthrough, when there's a shift in a character due to her own centering, her powerful self-authorization, I celebrate inside myself.

What I can do with ease in the classroom doesn't always transfer into my own life though. The following poem, a reflection on the novel, *Push*, shows my apprehension of not just naming abuse but of breaking the cycle of silence and shame with my girls (two teenagers, and one, months shy from being 21):

This is what Sapphire wrote Precious to speak:

"I think I waz rape."

If I author myself, I can teach my self to tell my daughters:

"It wasn't just me--but "...." and "...." all shared some variance of "----."

Nah,

Maybe it only works for fiction.

On Consciousness and Reflection: With an Eye Towards Healing

I sat down for my guided meditation. Exquisite pain in my left shoulder blade. I was reminded to bear witness to what was happening in my body. In my mind I went off thinking—so this thing happened to me as a little girl. And it was confusing especially because I thought I had invited it. And then another thing happened for the span of a year. This was even more confusing because I didn't know what to do with the fact that there was some pleasure associated with it. I didn't even know the word shame then. And then later in my adult womanhood, I learned what happened to my mom and grandma.

I kept thinking, this grief, it lives in my shoulders and in other places, too. Until, bam, I decide that I don't want it to anymore.

I am still trying to integrate this lesson. To save my own life, to pass my own class, I have got to catch it. I've got to decide something different. I've got to see the possibility of a new way of being. Contemplative practice opens up a pathway—one that helps me to see and feel myself more clearly. It takes me to a place that keeps me in my body, in reflection about it.

A loving reminder for how I can craft a healthier way of being came through after a meditation:

Once I decided to make myself pregnant with myself
I immediately went to wretch.
And. Let. Go.

In Process, In Practice

With the three sounds of the gong,
I was lifted out and back.
From the inside out--wrists alive and trembling.
Pain. Diminishing.
Throat Opening.
Eyes. Nose. Releasing.
--for me and my daughters