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# Swim Lessons: Black Motherhood, Embodied Meditation, and Healing

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*Contemplative practices offer a site for resilience, healing, and alleviation of the pressures of parenting within the context of oppressive systems, particularly for Black single mothers. This autoethnography offers an understanding of how meditation through embodied movement facilitates physical and emotional healing individually and within the parent-child relationship. Through personal storytelling, the author describes how swim lessons, taught by son to mother, heal the pain, anger, and separation they experienced during the difficult teen and young adult years. Swimming, with its patterned movement, intrinsic breathwork, and meditative quality, helps mother and son negotiate his shift into adulthood, his challenges with mental health, and the mother's use of yoga asana (physical practice) and meditation for self-care. Contemplation plays a key role in breaking down patterns of behavior and thought (samskaras) and allows them to move forward in new ways of relating to each other through "letting be."*

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My son is my swim coach. He's a good coach. He's a perfectionist when it comes to form. Knows when to push me and when to pull back. Praises me when I do well. Makes me laugh through difficult laps by swimming next to me under water so that I see him there along the way each time I turn my head for a breath. Looks at me through darkened goggles. Gives me a thumbs up as bubbles escape his mouth and nose, his overgrown curls on his capless head surging and flowing with each of his underwater strokes. It hasn't always been this way with us, but this is the way it is now. Like many single Black mothers, I have forged a path through motherhood that, as poet Langston Hughes (1994) described in his poem "Mother to Son," was "no crystal stair." I am Black in a white

world, a woman in a patriarchal society, and single in a world that often lines up by twos. Mothering is already a weighty undertaking as women have fought for and earned places within higher education and the work place and, therefore, often take on dual roles at work and at home. For Black mothers, the task is even greater as scholars, therapists, and practitioners of contemplative practices are acknowledging the ancestral legacy of strength, but also of trauma, on Black bodies, in Black families, and among the Black community. As Africans in America, we face disconnection from our ancestral homeland, collective trauma through the Middle Passage and enslavement, historical and present-day segregation, and the daily onslaught of racism that persists through to the present. This trauma is housed in the body. Even as it is collective and intergenerational, it is also individual and personal. bell hooks (2015) writes, “Living as we do in a white-supremacist capitalist patriarchal context . . . , choosing ‘wellness’ is an act of political resistance” (p. 7). And because the political is necessarily linked to the personal, this resistance is inevitably tied to our collective and personal liberation. hooks states further:

Knowing when to quit is linked to knowing one’s value. If black women have not learned to value our bodies then we cannot respond fully to endangering them by undue stress. Since society rewards us most, indicates we are valuable, when we are willing to push ourselves to the limit and beyond, we need a life-affirming practice, a counter system of valuation in order to resist this agenda. Most black women have not yet developed a counter-system. (p. 42)

I intuitively sought out my own counter system—yoga. My image of yoga was that it was a form of self-care that was self-indulgent and unaffordable. It felt selfish more than selfless, audaciously luxuriant more than absolutely necessary for sustenance and survival. Increasingly, Black women are connecting the idea of self-care, not to indulgence and not even to sustaining ourselves in oppressive structures, but also as a means of resisting them. Rather than being unaffordable, self-care

practices are ones that we cannot afford to do without, hence Audre Lorde’s famous line that “Caring for myself is not self-indulgence. It is self-preservation, and that is an act of political warfare.” This sentiment has taken on new prominence in a time when the danger that Black bodies encounter is increasingly evident in the midst of a global pandemic. Therapist and author Resmaa Menakem (2017) states that “over generations, African Americans have developed a variety of body-centered responses to help settle their bodies and blunt the effects of racialized trauma” (p. 15). The body-centered response to my stress, chronic pain, and high blood pressure was yoga. As a swimmer, my son quickly realized the pool was his form of meditation, his respite from the stress of schooling was his counter-system to the daily incidents of racism. It also provided the self-regulation he needed as an emotional and active child. He taught me how this much-needed space of healing could be found in the yoga studio, on a meditation cushion, and even in the pool.

### **“Still Climbin’” Through Collective Trauma**

It’s not always easy to get to the opposite wall during the swim sets that my son assigns me. The sets he gives me are timed and require me to start at a specific second on the digital clock displayed on the wall at the other end of the pool. After each lap he waits with me at the wall as the seconds count down, me breathing hard to calm my heart as it pounds and pulses the blood through my body to deliver fresh oxygen to the muscles that need it. He gives me guidance: how to move my hand in the water to maximize the stroke, how to turn my head so that I breathe efficiently enough to conserve energy and assure that my movement through the water is unencumbered. He gives me encouragement—tells me how much faster I am swimming, how straight my form looks in the water, how hard it is now but how much easier it will soon be. And then he sends me off on the next lap often despite my protestations and complaints. “Mom, listen to your coach.” Seeing him there along the way swimming next to me, kicking confidently and fluidly while I struggle to the wall, his eyes on me, face in a determined look of encouragement, both reassures me and makes me realize that we are at that point when the roles have reversed. *He* is guiding *me*. I am following *his* instructions.

These instructions are not just for swimming from one side of the pool to the other. These are instructions for life. And our lives are contained in a social world tinged with racial inequities that even make us unique as a Black mother and son, swimming in a pool in a white middle- to upper-class community. It is in this context and the challenges we faced because of it that I now have so much respect for what he can teach me and for the teacher that he has become. Since birth he has taught me so much more without him even knowing it. I have had to stretch and grow to parent him. In many ways we are opposites. He is outgoing and social, a performer who thrived on attention and who shifted the mood of a room when he entered. He externalized his emotions and he felt them strongly. These same qualities did not bode well within the classroom. I was the reserved student and, later, professor. I internalized my emotions so that they were less obtrusive, held within the body. The times when the waters of his childhood were rougher, when the teaching was less direct, less smooth, less encouraging, were the times I learned the most as I reached for tools to manage what sometimes felt less like calm and more like crisis in parenting. He is what brought me to yoga *asana* (physical postures) and meditation. He has brought me to my highest yoga—the yoga practiced through mindfully managing a healthy mother-son relationship.

As Menakem (2017) and Bessell van der Kolk (2014) point out, trauma is not just mental or emotional, but is embodied. Black women and mothers face unique stressors under this collective trauma as we negotiate motherhood, the world of work, and our need for self-care. We often keep pushing through life, like the speaker in Hughes' poem, "still climbin'" even through difficult times that require rest.

“(Life) had tacks in it,  
 And splinters,  
 And boards torn up,  
 And places with no carpet on the floor—  
 Bare.  
*But all the time*  
*I’ve been a-climbin’ on...* (emphasis mine)

As Black women, we relate to the speaker since her sentiments often mirror our own realities and that of the women who came before us, so much so that our trauma often provides points of boundary-making for Black identity (Dillard 2012). Trauma is part of the experience of being Black in America. Black mothering, then, requires that we mother ourselves as much as our children. It means that we give ourselves what we need to prepare for the job even when we never knew these were needs or that we could find time for them or that we deserved them. I, like many Black women, labored during the day on the job and in graduate school, and then returned home to labor (in both senses of that word) as a mother all within the context of racism, sexism, and heterosexism. Relentlessly moving forward feels necessary for survival but is punishing on the mind, body, and soul. In Hughes' poem, the mother advises and encourages her son with the exhortation:

So boy, don't you turn back.  
 Don't you set down on the steps  
 'Cause you finds it's kinder hard.  
 Don't you fall now—

In a reversal of the flow of learning in the poem, the swim lessons with my son allowed me to contemplate the ways that *he* taught *me* this lesson; that through being his mother, he grew me into the wisdom of these words.

### **Mother-Son Relationship as Relational Yoga**

Yoga, in Indian philosophy, is the study of Self from gross to subtle. Matter is the gross form; the mind and the soul are subtle. The body, as matter, provides a way for us to make sense of the world. In yoga, we can pay close attention to what we see, hear, smell, taste, and touch. We acquire much important information about the world and our relationship to it through the five senses of our physical body. We instinctively learn what we like and dislike, what to eat, what to avoid, what causes pain or pleasure. Yoga asana is the bridge from the physical (gross) form to the spiritual (subtle) form. Thus, B. K. S. Iyengar (2005) states, "Even

in simple asanas, one is experiencing the three levels of the quest: the external quest, which brings firmness to the body; the internal quest, which brings intelligence; and the innermost quest, which brings benevolence of spirit" (p. 24). Through meditation, we can also observe our psychological processes—what we think and feel emotionally. The mind is also matter, but in more subtle form. We can get an idea of our patterns of thought, our prominent emotions, our obsessions, anxieties, fantasies, misperceptions—all of which serve to protect or promote our ego just as our five senses protect our physical body. But unlike our physical senses, *samskaras*—our patterned thoughts, emotions, memories are imprinted in the mind as habits and distract from reality shaping the way we negotiate our lived experiences. The ancient philosopher, Sage Patanjali, who wrote down the philosophy of yoga previously encoded only in the oral tradition, states within the first two sutras of his volume (or aphorisms) that the purpose of yoga is to calm the fluctuations of the mind (Satchidananda, 2012). Calming the mind, smoothing the ridges of these patterned waves of thought on the shore of the psyche, regulates and heals the body.

### **Embodied Trauma and Embodied Healing**

Western science is catching up with ancient knowledge about the clear interrelationship between our thoughts and emotions and our physical bodies. Van der Kolk (2015) describes how, through the care of our first social relationship, our mother teaches us to regulate our nervous system as we are soothed through emotional and physical engagement. Likewise, when we experience trauma, the body responds with the deregulation of our nervous system. What we think and feel is housed in our bodies in the form of muscle tightening, hormone releasing, and other physiological responses. These physical reactions are directly related to our fight, flight, or freeze responses. But like our thoughts, these reactions can become patterns that are tough to undo even when we no longer need them. This is not always easy for those of us who have experienced our bodies as sites of held trauma—often both personal and ancestral. Menakem states,

...many Black bodies don't feel settled around white ones for reasons that are all too obvious: the long brutal history of enslavement and subjugation; racial profiling (and occasional murder) by police; stand-your-ground laws; ...and the habitual grind of everyday disregard, discrimination, institutional disrespect, over-policing, over-sentencing, and microaggressions. (p. 15)

As Black mothers we are often unsettled so that coping with stress is completely normalized as a constant way of life. In fact, trauma can often lead to a disconnection, or what van der Kolk calls "losing the body" as we seek to mentally cope with neglect or abuse and then hold on to those physical and emotional responses in situations of relative safety.

My son and I have emotional samskaras that have shaped our relationship and that are with us to be subconsciously healed in the pool during our swim lessons. We have patterns of actions, reactions, thoughts, memories, emotions, tensions, releases that are ingrained in how we behave with one another. *He is my son*, flesh of my flesh blood of my blood—with all the personal, social, cultural, and ancestral notions of what this means held up in us both. The mind-body connection determines that our samskaras are bound up in our bodies and also in what we think, feel, say, and do. These patterns run all the more deeply since I am a single mother and he is an only child. The only way to break a pattern is to cease enacting it, to replace it with new, hopefully more healthy ones. The reversal of the mother-son pattern, his guiding, encouraging, strengthening me in the pool, is what allowed me to see the ways that the pattern had and could shift. As we moved through the world together, the waters were often rough. We have often felt that we only had each other. Me and him against the world. It has not always been easy. In fact, at times it's been very hard. Since my son's teen years, and probably before, mothering in times of conflict—whether my own or with him—triggered in me physical reactions of stomach tightening, shoulder and neck muscle retracting, teeth clenching, breath holding, heart ache. This is not an exaggeration. In fact, this is understatement. This is what is real. My son and I have existed in the duality—spaces of tension and release, contraction and expansion, enmeshed closeness



and avoidant distance. And yet, *my son is my swim coach. My son is my highest yoga.* The fact that we exist in the duality is what leads me to yoga as a source of resolution. Yoga is where dualities are integrated. It is where mind and body align for healing. My first entrée into yoga came as I made space for self-care as the single mother of a Black child in a white supremacist society, as a graduate student of education in a system that often marginalizes Black children as much as it provides opportunity, as a Black, queer woman negotiating anti-Blackness in a heterosexist patriarchy. My son swam through his own turbulent waters of schooling, which proved difficult as a Black child in predominantly white schools especially with his challenges with self-regulation. In many classrooms and schools, Black boys are often not allowed the leeway of hyperactivity, strong emotions, and bumping against the guardrails of boundaries in adolescents. Add the misplaced pain and anger of an absentee father and having a mother with high expectations and the challenges of the relationship meant that we were often enacting and embodying pain, frustration, anger and resentment. I went to yoga when I finally acknowledged that taking care of myself and being away from my young son and my work for that hour and a half each day was as much a part of being a “good mother” as my presence and my labor. In fact, in moments of my own deregulation, my son in his young wisdom would say with his own exasperation, “Mom, go to yoga.” As a mother, the call to go to yoga, whether from within or from my child, was a call to heed my own mind and body calling for a space and time for healing, for regrouping, for strengthening in preparation for the challenges ahead.

### **The Highest Yoga: Embodied Mothering and Healing**

The first couple of weeks of our swimming together were joyous, strengthening, nurturing, and healing. My body was getting stronger in that way that causes lots of pain before it starts to feel good. My neck, my shoulders, my abs—all those areas that require strength to swim are the same areas where I hold tension. Even my breath, which I often hold in moments of anxiety, is necessarily involved. Just as in yogic *pranayama*—breathwork—I am required to pay close attention to the breath. The long, deep

breathing I practiced at home before or during meditation, created elongated and calming rhythmic movement in my physical and mental bodies that I could use not only in swim but in times of stress and anxiety. This is indeed why we call yoga a practice—it is exercised in a safe and contained space for use in times of need. Just as swimmers engage in swim sets during practice to prepare for the actual meet.

My physical yoga practice has helped me immeasurably in the pool and in the “real world” when the practice of observing and regulating my thoughts and emotions, especially around my son. Although I have been heavily focused on physical asanas, it’s my meditation practice that allowed me to contemplate what was happening in my body. The swimming brought me much pain. As I complained about it, a friend described it as a “good pain” since it came from working out. But it didn’t feel good. I don’t just mean that it hurt, I mean that it felt like something was wrong. This pain felt like injury, though I had done nothing in the pool to injure myself. This was a tight burning in the abdomen that confused me about its source. Was I intensely hungry after swimming and aching combined? Was there something inside from past surgeries that was being stretched and taxed? Was it the pain of the womb, the memory of tensing those same muscles in childbirth? The trauma associated with that miracle? Was it the ancestral pain of Black motherhood, of loss? Or was it just the general good ache of working out muscles I hadn’t worked in my yoga practice? I really couldn’t be sure.

During a meditation practice at that time, my teacher had us focus on—of all things—the belly. As often happens, the practice gave me exactly what I needed when I needed it. It took me out of my head and into the body. As I breathed into the belly, which was aching as it had done for days, I allowed myself to feel the ache. Lama Rod Owens (2016) writes:

Healing is being situated in love ... It is interrogating our bodies as an artifact of accumulated traumas and doing the work of processing that trauma by developing the capacity to notice and be with our pain. If we are to heal, then we must allow our awareness to settle into and integrate with the pain and discomfort that

has been habitually avoided. (pp. 64-65)

I interrogated the pain in my belly. Much as I would ask my tongue if a taste were bitter or sweet, my skin if a touch were painful or gentle, my olfactory system if what I was smelling were good for me or dangerous, much as I would ask if my worries were warranted, if my fears were justifiable, if my anger could be channeled, I asked my belly what it was trying to teach me about its ache. Pain whose source was unidentifiable because its source was ubiquitous. It was an ache. It was a burn. It was sharp. It was consistent. Pain that at some moments felt unbearable and prevented me from sleeping. Chögyam Trungpa (2002) describes meditation as the practice of “letting be” (p. 8). In that “letting” what I learned is that it was not good or bad pain. It was just pain. That thing that tells the body that something needs healing. It was there because I had been hurt. When or by whom is irrelevant. It was there because when I am stressed, I tense up and sometimes when I am around my son I am tense. *My son is my swim coach*. It is there because when I swim I need to tense these muscles but I also need to relax them. It was there because when muscles grow, first they tear—that tearing causes the ache. My son and I have experienced a tearing. We have known the pain of disappointing each other, betraying each other, lashing out at each other through his teens and early twenties. But we are also as connected as my limbs are to my torso. What I learned is that the ache of exercise is followed by a regeneration of muscle tissue that ends up strengthening the muscles that were torn in the process of working them, and so it is with the muscles in my belly. It was teaching me that despite the ache, there would be new strength previously unexperienced. My son had been pushing me in the pool as he had in life. It was not a good or a bad thing. It was a thing that was helping me grow. That pain was there to show me that nothing has been strong enough to completely rip us apart. It has only served to strengthen new muscles in place of weaker ones. Through this embodied learning we are discovering a new way of “letting be” together. As my son moves from child to adult, this letting be requires my letting go.

When I began the practice of allowing time for stretching the ten-

sion out of the body, breathing to maximize efficiency of releasing the calming response and oxygenating the blood, and sitting in stillness to allow what thoughts and emotions needed to emerge, the true healing began. Even if we emotionally lose the body by disassociating from it, our bodies are still connected to our psychological and emotional responses to the conditions of the world around us. The “weathering hypothesis” illuminates the ways that this is especially true for and detrimental to Black mothers, as it attends to the ways that socioeconomic disparities lead to differences in birth outcomes for Black women who are at higher risk of infant mortality at childbirth (Geronimus, 1992). In other words, structural racism and the stresses associated with it are risking the lives of Black mothers and their babies. The mind-body construct then is contextualized within a world that has as much of an impact on the health of Black bodies as anything that an individual mother could herself do to improve it.

### **The Yoga of Racialized Trauma**

Despite the view that yoga and other spiritual practices somehow transcend social identities such as race, gender, and sexuality, and therefore does not necessitate attention to the ways that social structures impinge on the body, mind, and spirit, yoga as a holistic practice is actually a way not *over* or *beyond* the body, but *through* our racialized and gendered bodies to liberate our mind and spirit. Yoga practitioner and therapist, Gail Parker (2020), notes that there is a lack of therapeutic responses to race based trauma and has, therefore, built a system of restorative practices around the therapeutic aspects of yoga. She states, “Racially informed Restorative Yoga and meditation practices can help by offering opportunities to step away from repeated experiences of ethnic and race-based wounding, while building the necessary stamina and resilience to develop effective coping strategies” (p. 38). Because Black bodies experience both individual and collective trauma, remedies should be both individual and collective. Because our trauma is also intergenerational, as Menakem (2017) points out, it leaves imprints on our genetic code as much as on how we interact within and between racial groups, how we parent, and on how we must heal. Menakem states, “...

we heal primarily in and through the body, not just through the rational brain ... In addition, trauma and healing ... is a collective experience in which case our approaches for mending ... must be collective and communal as well."

We know that ultimately this healing is not just about coping. Parker nods to the yogic sages from India when she states that yoga leads to personal transformation. The ultimate goal of personal or political resistance to oppressive structures is freedom and in Indian philosophy, the goal of yoga is also liberation. Liberation, according to Patanjali, is attained through the body, indeed he states in Sutra 2:18 that, "The seen is of the nature of the *gunas* (qualities of nature/matter): illumination, activity, and inertia; and consists of the elements and sense organs, whose purpose is to provide both experiences and liberation to the *Purusa* (the divine self)" (p. 98). Liberation, then, is reliant on the body and the movement of the Self through the material world for its attainment does not and cannot avoid the physical and social realities it encounters. Our work together in the pool mimics the work I do in yoga studios through the steady relentless movement of the body, the meditative calming of the mind through rhythmic movement, and the underlying life-giving *prana* (life force)—within the breath. The lessons we learn in the struggle will heal us. If the trauma moves from mother to son, then so must the healing, so might the liberation.

The growth in my own relationship with my son has been a long time coming. It is not over. We are in a moment of closeness. Of getting to know each other again. Rather than mother and child, we are learning each other as two adults who have been through so much together. Who have loved each other intensely but sometimes not liked each other much. We have put each other through it. "It" being the toughest aspects of growing that either of us has ever had to do and often not wanted to do. But underlying all the pain and growth has been an intense love. The love of self that propels me across the pool, despite how hard it feels, because I know it will make me stronger. The kind of love for my son that allows me to let him teach me after I have seen myself as his teacher. The kind of love that he has for me, the determined perfectionist and encourager, that person he has counted on to help provide

structure and guidance in his life, but who has also in my own humanity hurt and wounded him. The circle of unconditional love between the self, the mother, and the son supported and strengthened by the center, the ache and the growth in the abdomen, the core. The corporeal experience of this physical realm of existence. Out of the head and lived and learned through the body, the breath, the heart. *The highest yoga. The greatest teacher.*

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