

FOREWORD BY
PATRICIA
RAYBON

A SOJOURNER'S TRUTH

CHOOSING FREEDOM

AND COURAGE IN A

DIVIDED WORLD

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CHAPTER ONE

PAIN

TRUTH IS, YOUR IDENTITY CAN GET YOU INTO HOT WATER

*If you are silent about your pain, they'll
kill you and say you enjoyed it.*

ZORA NEALE HURSTON

It was a forbidden conversation.

“Carmen, Momma says I have to always be there for you,” I told my younger sister. “Some white people are not going to like you because you are black, and some black people are not going to like you because you are light skinned.”

I had waited a long time before sharing this information that my mother had relayed to me in secret. I was only a child, in middle or early high school. I didn't really understand the significance of these words, and I don't know how I expected my little sister to respond when I told her this truth. But I was surprised and even shocked to see tears well up in her eyes, fall down to her cheeks, and land in the palms of her hands as she began to gasp for breath and cry uncontrollably.

“What's wrong?” I asked, confused and uncertain now.

As she tried to control her body, she looked up at me and said, “People don't like me.”

I didn't know what to do with that response.

It wasn't until many years later that I became aware of the brown paper bag tests. Author and professor Michael Eric Dyson wrote, "In fact, New Orleans invented the brown paper bag party—usually at a gathering in a home—where anyone darker than the bag attached to the door was denied entrance. The brown bag criterion survives as a metaphor for how the black cultural elite quite literally establishes a caste system along color lines within black life." For black people in general, it's the epitome of self-hate brought on by the reality that we are not white in a society that normalizes all things white as pure, right, and better. For the black elite, the test was a way to maintain the pride, self-righteous assurance, and soothing comfort of knowing that they were not poor. There was no need for social mingling with black people who were dark skinned or impoverished, because those people were not marriage material.

Thank God my sister and I had a loving mother—a black woman who would not set her black daughters up for failure. As we grew, she told us the truth about the hardships we would likely face in this world, and she didn't hold back. My mother warned us about the setup of systemic racism and cultural biases (although she did not use those terms), and she had a hope for a better future for us all.

So there I was, sitting next to my younger sister trying to have an adult-like conversation. At the time my sister's lighter skin color would have passed the brown paper bag test, and my browner complexion would not.

In that moment, the message "People don't like you" is not what I wanted to communicate at all. I saw my sister's tears and thought, *What on earth have I done?* What I wanted her to hear was, "My sista, don't you worry about a thing because no matter what happens in this world and who stands against you, I have your back. You can trust that, and you can trust me."

There is truth in the statement “When one person hurts in a family, everyone aches. And this is always the choice: pain demands to be felt—or it will demand you feel nothing as all.” My sister was born a light-skinned black woman in America, and this would be the source of her pain. To some extent, I suppose this was the source of my pain as well. Along with that pain, I felt my first yearning of leadership in my longing to protect my vulnerable little sister. Yet I couldn’t even safeguard myself. And I was powerless to defend her.

This was the moment I realized that things were not quite right in this world.

LIFE OF THE BROKEN AND BROKENHEARTED

Miriam’s story resonated with me because she too was charged with watching her younger sibling. We meet Miriam at the beginning of the book of Exodus keeping a vigilant eye over her baby brother, Moses, as he drifts down the Nile River. Miriam was a servant and faithful witness, but she seems to appear only as a footnote in the story. At first glance, we all think this story is about baby Moses. But the story is actually bigger than Moses, and it’s bigger than Miriam. To better understand Moses’ journey, we have to start at the beginning because what happens in our formative years has a way of shaping our adult lives. As we reflect, we come to understand that Moses’ story and ours are all a part of God’s redemptive story.

God’s big story of creation, fall, and redemption is steeped in pain. For godly people and leaders specifically, pain is often the tool God uses to help us realize our passion and purpose. Being exposed to the reality of racism as a child and feeling helpless to do anything about it revealed my pain. For Moses, the pain was revealed in the basket that held his three-month-old body afloat in the water. It was not a pain that he bore—not yet anyway—but it was the pain of his community.

He was in the basket because the king of Egypt, consumed by his own fears and desire for population control, issued a death sentence on all newborn Hebrew boys. The pain of death—the reality that this boy would surely die if he remained at home with his biological family—is what put baby Moses in the basket. The pain of his mother, Jochebed, and her last hope to save his life is what put him in the basket. The pain of the heavy hand of an op-



Pain is often the tool God uses to help us realize our passion and purpose.

pressor and more than four hundred years of his people's enslavement is what put Moses in the basket. The pain of the possibility that God

had forgotten them is what put him in that basket. As a baby he could not carry that pain, but this pain landed him in the basket, floating down the Nile.

In reading we learn quickly that the Exodus narrative is not just a story about Moses or his sister, Miriam. Exodus teaches us about what God is doing in the midst of a people group to accomplish his will on earth. God had heard the cries of the enslaved Hebrew community, and he intended to do something about it.

God would use Moses to deliver his people out of their pain.

From the time captured Africans were bought to America and enslaved, they have longed for deliverance. But more than deliverance, they longed for the freedom to speak their own names, to preserve their own history, to keep their own property, to protect their own families, to work and enjoy the fruits of their own labor, to govern themselves, to tell their own stories, and perhaps to get some relief from their painful reality. Humanity is lost when slavery is normalized.

As a child, I didn't understand the biblical history, the mysteries of God, or his plan for my life. However, I did know when

something hurt. I sat with my pain as I watched my sister in silence, and perhaps for the first time in my life I began to experience the pain of the entire black community. I was heartbroken and remained at her side until I thought she would be okay, but our pain did not go away. In the same manner, Miriam “stood at a distance to see what would happen” to her baby brother, because she had no real control over or assurance of his safety (Exodus 2:4).

Acknowledging our pain makes us vulnerable.

VULNERABILITY AND SILENCE

Vulnerability can be dangerous in the same way water is dangerous. Like water, vulnerability can be the source of cleansing and renewal or it can be the source of drowning and death. But there is something else that is more dangerous than taking the risk of vulnerability, and that is silence.

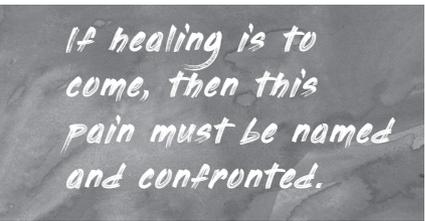
As an African American woman who loves my African American sistas, I have learned that we are often silent about what hurts us the most. Dr. Chanequa Walker-Barnes refers to this epidemic as a “Deadly Silence.” She writes:

Perhaps nowhere in society is the StrongBlackWoman more ubiquitous than in the Christian church. The church reinforces the mythology of the StrongBlackWoman by silencing, ignoring, and even romanticizing the suffering of Black women. Rather than offering a balm to heal the wounds of Black women who cry out about their pain, the church admonishes them with platitudes such as “God won’t give you any more than you can bear” and “If He brought you to it, He’ll bring you through it.”

Acclaimed Harlem Renaissance writer Zora Neale Hurston was also a black woman acquainted with suffering, and she understood that we, as African Americans, could not be silent about our pain

because silence would be the death of us. By swallowing the poison of our pain, we die a slow death, and for black people in America it seems as if nobody notices. As another artist wrote, “The heart dies a slow death, shedding each hope like leaves until one day there are none. No hopes. Nothing remains.”

Knowing the pain, history, violence, and silence that have shaped the African American narrative infuses how I read the



*If healing is to
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and confronted.*

Scriptures. I come from a marginalized and oppressed people group that was enslaved for more than three hundred years, so I try to imagine the helplessness and hopelessness that the Hebrew people felt as an entire generation of their boys were thrown into the Nile River. What would

be worse: knowing that the actual genocide took place, knowing that people in positions of power in the empire stood by and said nothing, or knowing that nothing would be done about this loss of innocent lives—that justice would not be served? This is a painful narrative that is quite familiar to African Americans. Murder by the state. Silence. Then nothing. The heart dies a slow death. The painful reality of this death emotionally cripples us, and black people have been conditioned to say, “Thank you,” and take our lethal doses with a smile.

But I am not without hope. We see from Moses’ story that God hears the cries of the oppressed. God enters our pain, through our suffering, even in the silence. If healing is to come, then this pain must be named and confronted. We cannot look away. With every truth-telling moment, we can better discern what these moments reveal about our history, our authentic selves, our leadership journey, and our hope for a better future. Only then can we challenge each other to join in God’s great work of justice, redemption, and reconciliation.

LET THIS ENCOUNTER WITH WATER CHANGE YOU

The power and wealth of the Egyptians prevented them from considering the pain that slavery inflicted on the Hebrew people. All the while, the Hebrews were crying out to God for their deliverance. Neither the Egyptians nor the Hebrews knew that one infant's trip to the water—a trip that could have meant life or death for him—would turn the tide and usher in freedom for an entire people group. This divine hope was made possible through the most unlikely source—the compassion of Pharaoh's daughter. When she discovered Moses floating in the water, she made a choice to see a human, not just a Hebrew boy.

Like Pharaoh's daughter, our healing from a sin-sick, power-driven, money-hungry, and racialized culture will come only when we learn to see differently. None of us really knows how one empathetic gesture, one listening ear, one kind word spoken, or one loving act can change the trajectory of a person's life. With her actions, Pharaoh's daughter made it possible for Moses to grow into manhood, in which he eventually learned that God always sets before us choices of life or death, blessings or curses. As Moses later instructed the Israelites:

This day I call the heavens and the earth as witnesses against you that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Now choose life, so that you and your children may live and that you may love the LORD your God, listen to his voice, and hold fast to him. (Deuteronomy 30:19-20)

Pharaoh's daughter reminds us that with every word and act, we choose either life or death for ourselves and for others.

Just as the physical act of Moses' mother placing him into the water and the physical act of Pharaoh's daughter drawing him out of it express their choices, our physical actions reveal the internal condition of our souls and whether or not we are truly responding

to God. Choosing life means participating in God's redemptive work as he transforms families, reshapes communities, and converts nations. Whenever we do the hard or courageous thing in spite of our lack of understanding, our familial upbringing, our own pain, or difficult circumstances, we are choosing life.

AN INVITATION FOR THE VULNERABLE

As the old spiritual says,

Take me to the water,
take me to the water,
take me to the water
to be baptized.

Nothing but the righteous,
nothing but the righteous,
nothing but the righteous
shall see God.

We want to see God—to be aware of his presence—but so often we miss him because we are evaluating the wrong things in the wrong way. We try to determine whether God is at work based on our own prosperity and temporal “blessings.” However, the Bible has a different standard of evaluation. Through Moses' story we learn that God communes with us in the mountaintop experiences of our lives, but also in the wilderness, on the long walk to freedom, and in the waves of the wild and dangerous waters.

God is with me in the water—to rescue me from all the consuming patterns of thought that remain from a life and history of being enslaved. Let there be no doubt that we have all been enslaved to something. Like Pharaoh and his daughter, Jochebed and her husband, Moses and his sister, we all have different encounters with and proximity to the water. Our interaction with the water allows us to consider whether we will aim to command it or allow it to transform us.

We can come thirsty, helpless, and weak, acknowledging our desperate need for change. That is when God meets and rescues us.

Get baptized and come out anew. Go into or come out of the troubled waters. That's the invitation from God to each of us. Enter into the pain and suffering of this life to find your purpose and passion through a new life. Because we have been conditioned to swallow or ignore the ever-present sin and pain, we need a spiritual baptism into a new way of thinking, being, and responding in this world. Jesus' invitation is "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. . . . For I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls" (Matthew 11:28-29). We have an invitation to lay our pain and burdens down.

When teaching about leadership and follower-ship, Jesus also said, "Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Therefore, whoever takes the lowly position of this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 18:3-4). We must come like that three-month-old baby boy floating in the river or like the little children who came to Jesus—realizing that there is nothing on earth we can do for ourselves. We come humbly, or we don't come at all.



*We come humbly, or
we don't come at all.*

Death awaits us if we stay in hiding or if we float adrift in the water, and if we want to live, we desperately need someone to come and lift us up out of it. We come with our pain, which eventually connects us to our purpose and passion, and then leads us into praise.

THE MYSTERY OF PAIN AND WEAKNESS

I've got so much to thank God for.

So many wonderful blessings and so many open doors.

A brand-new mercy, along with each new day.

That's why I praise you.

We stood in front of many congregations as our soloist sang these opening words from Kurt Carr's song "For Every Mountain." I planted my feet and stood proudly in my service dress blue uniform as a member of the United States Naval Academy Gospel Choir. Many of us were African American and first-generation college students, and life was hard. As we listened and then sang, we remembered our various trials: studying in the wee hours of the night, those who had left us and would not graduate, and those who we left still struggling back home. I remembered all of the failed swim tests before I eventually passed and could graduate. I remembered my pain, and I sang praises to the Lord. That singing sometimes turned into tears, or raised hands, or shouts of "Hallelujah," or praise dancing. While God does not always remove our pain and suffering, he does not abandon us in the troubled waters of life. He is present to carry us up, over, or through.

The apostle Paul was honest about his struggles. He asked God to take them away, but God did not. In fact, God's word of comfort to Paul was simply this: "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." God promised to be *enough* for Paul, so Paul's response was praise: "Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me. That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong" (2 Corinthians 12:9-10).

Can we get real with ourselves and each other for a moment? None of this makes any sense. Weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecution, and difficulties cause us deep pain and suffering. Yet it is often in our pain and in our torment that we experience God's grace, and the painful experiences strengthen and refine us. This is what some scholars and theologians refer to as the upside-down kingdom of God: what makes sense, looks right, or feels good to us is often not the Lord's way.

This is why Jesus teaches that if someone slaps our right cheek, we should offer them up the left one to slap as well (Matthew 5:39). I'm not sanctified enough to offer up my face like that! Let's be clear: Jesus is not promoting violence or domestic abuse, but he is teaching about our responsibilities as peacemakers. We are not to respond or to treat other people as their sins deserve. We must not seek our own revenge.

There are rewards for this peacemaking behavior because the bigger objective of Jesus' teaching is to reveal the purposes of his kingdom. In his kingdom, the first will be last and the last will be first (Matthew 20:1-16). In his kingdom, redeemed slaves and their former masters, the poor and the rich, the powerless and the powerful, will sit at the table together. In his kingdom, you can go into the water dirty and come out of it clean. Jesus promises to use the foolish things of this world to confound the wise, and "the weak things of the world to shame the strong" (1 Corinthians 1:26-27). If we are going to make it in this upside-down life, we need to see God's grace at work in our pain and in our weaknesses.

God's power can be revealed through us if we simply get out of thinking that we know more than we actually do, or that we can effectively respond beyond our sinful human limitations without accepting this invitation from Christ. God invites us to confess our pain. Come as little children. Depend on him. Praise him for our weaknesses, Paul says! Not only that, but we are also to delight in our insults, in our hardships, in our persecutions, and in our difficulties. And these painful life experiences are to lead us into praise? Help us, oh Lord!

In our weaknesses, God's grace is revealed. God's grace is revealed when people like my mother tell the truth about life, and when people like Moses' mother or Pharaoh's daughter take risks to preserve a child's life. Because we are vulnerable humans, we all need somebody to have our backs, to tell the truth, to take

risks, to safeguard us, to lift us up out of the water, and to show us a better way. Paul's mysterious boasting and praise reveals that Jesus has done this for us. Because of Jesus, God can use our pain to inform us so we can all be better together—even with our diverse backgrounds.

Through our pain and in our weaknesses, we are collectively made strong.

TRUTH IS: We all suffer from pain, and God uses that pain to shape us for his good kingdom purposes.

REFLECTION QUESTION: Ann Voskamp writes, “Not one thing in your life is more important than figuring out how to live in the face of unspoken pain.” What is the source of your pain?

SCRIPTURE MEDITATION: “The LORD is close to the broken-hearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit” (Psalm 34:18).

PERSONAL AFFIRMATION: I can trust God with my pain, understanding that pain can serve as a catalyst to finding my passion and purpose.

CALL TO ACTION: We start with our own healing. Are there any steps you need to take to process pain that has surfaced for you?

PRAYER: God, I thank you that you have not abandoned me in my weakness. You have not left me alone in this world to fight for myself. You are ever present, ever caring, and ever loving to take me through my pain. Help me to trust you to do this sacred work. In the power and authority of your son, Jesus', name. Amen.

TWEET: We come with our pain, which eventually connects us to our purpose and passion, and then leads us into praise.
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