

New Voices Showcase: A Compilation

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Hogg Foundation
for Mental Health

Foreword

In 2022, the Hogg Foundation for Mental Health launched the New Voices Showcase. It was an opportunity for talented and aspiring writers to submit personal essays describing how their mental health has been impacted during this time of heightened injustice, race-related trauma, and the COVID-19 pandemic. In particular, the foundation was interested in promoting fresh voices from the perspective of those historically excluded due to race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, disability, gender, religion, or economic standing. A small number of the New Voices Showcase authors earned cash awards for their submissions due to their quality. This compilation contains all accepted New Voices Showcase submissions. The Hogg Foundation thanks all of these writers for their thoughtful reflections, and for helping us enrich the larger conversation on mental health.

The views expressed in the following essays do not represent the Hogg Foundation for Mental Health. Essays have been edited for length and clarity.

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Now is NOT the Time

by Penny Radtke Adams

Depression - a word not readily spoken in the 50s when I was a young girl. But for me at that time, depression was a nasty dragon that had just begun to rear its ugly head and spew its fiery breath on the days of my life. "I'm going to be gone for a while," my mother said as we sat on her bed. "I'll be staying with Aunt Al and Uncle Doc. But there are some things I need to tell you before I leave."

I was only ten years old, but she proceeded to tell me about the "birds and the bees." I could feel my stomach tumbling and my head throbbing with information I did not need to know at that time. But the question I was afraid to ask was, "WHY ARE YOU LEAVING?"

In the 50s, not many of life's harsh realities were shared with children. So, I was unaware that my mother was having what was known in those days as a "nervous breakdown." While she was gone, she received several shock treatments in my uncle's clinic. The treatments seemed to help, and she appeared to be free from depression for a few years. Then in the 70s, she attempted suicide.

No mental health resources were available in the little town where my mother and father lived. She was once again sent away for treatment, which continued off and on until the 80s, when she was prescribed antidepressants. Only when medication became available did my mother become free of the dragon's fire. That could have been conquered so much earlier in her life. Antidepressants kept her depression in check until her death at 95 years of age.

Antidepressants chased away the depression dragon not only from my mother, but also my daughter. At the age of thirteen, she spent eight months in the hospital for treatment of anorexia and depression, gradually moving away from the initial use of strong drugs to antidepressants. Sadly, she attempted suicide a few years later, and it became apparent that she would probably always need antidepressants to help her cope with life. My daughter has successfully been taking antidepressants for more than twenty years, discontinuing them only when she was pregnant.

My own periods of depression were not as severe as those of my mother and daughter. But having witnessed their battles, I knew what to do when the dragons of hopelessness, depression, anxiety, and grief appeared on my own doorstep and refused to leave. So, along with therapy, I was prescribed antidepressants to help keep the monsters at bay. Experience has told me that I, too, will probably need them for the remainder of my life.

Fast-forward to today – a pandemic has wreaked havoc on the minds and lives of many. In the past, I learned many ways to keep the dragons away, and I used those same remedies during this trying time. Socializing in groups was not encouraged, but I gathered with friends who took vaccinating and masking as seriously as I did. To keep in touch with family, I met with them on Zoom. I even homeschooled four of my grandchildren for a semester – one as far away as Saudi Arabia. I spent time in my yard, marveling at the Texas sky filled with puffed-up cottony clouds and birds soaring high in the air like miniature planes. I painted the inside of my fence with lively colors and positive sayings. Gazing out my front window as the wind whipped waves on the lake white brought me peace. And the quiet time inspired me to begin writing my memoirs. Those remedies – and one puny pill – were the swords I used to slay the nasty dragons and maintain a positive mindset during the pandemic.

Then came the announcement from my doctor's office: my doctor had been dismissed because he refused to be vaccinated for COVID-19. I had never before found a primary physician with whom I had so readily connected. He was not just my doctor he was also my friend. We shared information about our families. I helped him with some personal issues. He helped me with my health issues. I was devastated by his departure.

Later, when I needed to address a minor health issue, I was able to quickly set up an initial visit with a new practitioner. The visit began with a short exam, during which he dismissed my issue as a non-concern.

Next came a review of my records and medications. When he saw my antidepressant prescription, he asked, "How long have you been taking this medication?" Not knowing exactly, I replied, "I think since about the time that it became publicly available."

Lastly, came his recommendations: "I think we'll start you on a half dose of your antidepressant until we can wean you off it entirely. You can just cut your current pills in half. I'll see you again in six weeks."

He walked out the door. I was too shocked to ask why he recommended I stop taking the antidepressants altogether. He had not asked me why I had started taking them, if I had any side effects, or how I felt about stopping. When I got my wits together at home, I realized that I was not happy with his decision, I thought that perhaps I would eventually give it a try or perhaps I would just speak with him about the possibility at my next appointment in six weeks. Unfortunately, a few days after my appointment, I fell while trimming flowers and broke my hip.

I have told people that the pain of a broken hip compares only to the pain of giving birth. Opioids eased my discomfort but did not eliminate it totally. During my three-day hospital stay, I was in a great deal of pain. At one point a morbid thought crossed my mind: "It might be easier to just die than to put up with this amount of pain." I had experienced pain many times before: arthritis, a broken ankle, gall bladder surgery, to name just a few. But that pain had never brought on thoughts of suicide.

On the last day of my hospitalization, the nurse came in to give me my medications. She set one pill down and began to cut it in half.

"What is that?" I asked her.

"It's your antidepressant," she said. "The doctor's orders on your chart are to cut your dosage in half."

Now I became angry. I had not realized the doctor had entered that order into my records. I thought it was up to me to experiment with cutting my dosages in half at his suggestion. The reason for my pain intolerance in the hospital became perfectly clear: the depression dragon was rearing his head.

As soon as I returned home, I set up a video appointment with the doctor. "I apologize for not asking you this before," I said, "but why is it you want to wean me off of my antidepressant?"

He droned on about how “people just keep taking these medications and not realizing the effects they might be having on them.”

I could not help myself from interrupting and asking, “And now would you like to hear MY story?” I proceeded to tell him about my mother, my daughter, and my own experience with depression, ending with the incident in the hospital. “I don’t think NOW is the time to stop taking my antidepressants!” I snapped.

He agreed and said it would probably be best to discontinue taking the drug at a later date.

What?? He still thought it would be best for me to stop taking the drug?

I have always known that there was a stigma attached to depression. When my daughter was in the hospital, a nurse provided me with this tidbit of wisdom: “It is very difficult for people who are close to a depressed individual. It is not a disease that you wish to advertise in the same way you would cancer or heart disease. So, you often end up suffering alone.”

Unfortunately, the stigma about mental health is still somewhat present, even though progress has been made. However, I had never before encountered a doctor who failed to discuss the symptoms of depression, who questioned the generational links, or who simply dismissed it as not needing treatment.

Frances Hodgson Burnett, author of *The Secret Garden*, once said, “If you look the right way, you can see that the whole world is a garden.” During this troublesome time of the pandemic, I have been looking “the right way.” I want to see the whole world as a garden forever. That is why I will continue my search for a new doctor – a doctor that definitely believes in dragons.

It Lives with ME

by Friday Ashley

This is my mantra, “It lives with ME.”

One day at a time my post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) lives with me. This is true when I engage in fun conversations with my coworkers and make plans with friends to meet for dinner. It’s true when the bank account has enough funds to pay the bills. It’s true when the recipe books are open and messy on the kitchen counter from conducting food experiments. The doctor celebrates with me because I am not at risk for developing heart disease. The neighborhood dogs will greet me by racing back and forth as I walk by their yards. This is what my life looks like when it’s in order.

When the disorder is ruining my day, I feel so overwhelmed that my only solution is to call in sick to work. After a trip to the gas station for cheesy popcorn, chocolate bars, and a 12 pack of sparkling water, I will consume it all from the couch watching any sci-fi movie. The doors and curtains will be closed up tight and no mirrors will reflect my eyes looking back.

Compared to what the disorder looked like for me just before the Covid-19 Virus arrived in Austin, Texas, this is not so bad. At that time, I had just moved into a spare room in a friend's house. A couple I had known for almost a year very kindly let me move in suddenly. My relationship with my spouse had finally exploded and I needed a safe place to live. When the message from public health officials was given that we must obey a curfew and strongly recommended wearing masks, I had lived with them only a few months. My housemates asked me to do my best to avoid bringing the virus home.

I was working multiple jobs. The full-time job was in a grocery store. There were several part-time side gigs going in an effort to build a private practice as a provider of holistic body work. These jobs put me out in public to a degree that social distancing was impossible. The grocery store implemented an emergency pay status for hourly employees and issued a sign to be placed on the dashboard of our vehicles stating that we were “Essential Workers.” Suddenly, the labor-of-love-side gig became a giant threat. I chose to temporarily close it down. Teaching

self-care to my clients had been a big priority. Refocusing all that knowledge on my self-care was my new priority.

Boosting my immune system by learning to cook healthy meals was first. Spending time outside hiking, drawing, and reading books allowed my mind to relax. I took the opportunity to finalize the divorce. On my thirty-minute drive to work I started listening to a talk radio station that had programming I believed would be balanced. I needed to hear about the virus and its effects on the world. As a bonus, the other reporting included interviews with people sharing their stories. At the grocery store we learned to stay safe. We adapted how we communicated with each other and the locals we served. We learned to read expressions at eye level, and we used our hands to help express what was being lost behind the mask.

When my mental health provider helped me understand that we were living in a time of a shared traumatic event worldwide, it took me a little while to comprehend that concept. I have been working with this provider for several years. I knew I lived with anxiety and my marriage was not a healthy relationship. It was only a few months ago that I had a conversation with her about my mental illness diagnosis of PTSD. This diagnosis could have been given to me three decades ago. I was born in 1972 and grew up in Northern Virginia. My childhood family was affected by the disease of alcoholism. My parents divorced when I was a toddler.

In my youth I experienced a shift where I thought I was sick, but I couldn't tell you what was wrong. There was not a cold or a bodily injury to show. When I reached middle school, I was not aware of any family member or friend who identified as a person of the LGBTQ+ community. There were no adults in my life who were open to or supportive of it. At school my peers and I were taught to reject anyone who was under suspicion for being LGBTQ+. I was selected as one of the unfortunates under suspicion because I was a girl whose favorite outfit was jeans and a t-shirt. My fear of the stories I heard about what happened to LGBTQ+ people was enough for me to absolutely deny any feelings of attraction to girls.

When I began high school, our parties were supplied with alcohol and other illegal substances. I found them useful to ease my anxiety of being open to the attention of teenage boys. Shortly after my 14th birthday I survived a sexual anxiety for being open to the attention of teenage

boys. Shortly after my 14th birthday I survived a sexual assault and reported it. Afterwards, I used alcohol to help ease my feelings of the assault and the courtroom hearing. Despite the feelings, I maintained the best grade point average I could. It gave me permission to isolate myself from others. I did have some friends who enjoyed going to Grateful Dead Concerts. I applied to a college in a town with a big community of Grateful Dead fans.

Shortly after college graduation I met a woman who challenged me to acknowledge my attraction to women. After she rejected me, I found another woman who helped me learn to be okay with this attraction. She was a native Texan. She decided to move back to Texas about five years after we met. I offered to help pack up the U-Haul Truck and make the road trip because I had to see for myself what was so great about this town with the official slogan, "Live Music Capital of the World." After a couple adventure-filled visits, the decision to execute my own move-to-Austin-road-trip happened during the beautiful spring season of 2003. The next year, once my friend was engaged to be married, my jealousy destroyed our friendship.

When the panic attacks started, I knew I was in a very dark place emotionally. The administrative manager of the grocery store provided me with resources to seek professional help. Once a week was not enough support for me, so I was encouraged to seek out a spiritual group. I attended the group daily and I achieved sobriety. This is where I met a woman who was attracted to me. She also grew up in an environment that rejected the LGBTQ+ community and had a similar experience with the struggle to be okay with her attraction to women. We were grateful when we found an Austin apartment complex that would allow us to sign a lease as a couple. We were grateful that my employer would provide benefits to same sex domestic partners. We were excited when Texas legalized same sex marriage.

Unfortunately, the effects of PTSD got the best of us and our twelve-year relationship. By the end of it, I was exhausted and felt like I was going to die. I did not lose family members to the Covid-19 virus. I lost my pets, my marriage, and the members of her family to the effects of my PTSD. I experience the emotional cycles of grief. After two years of living with the Covid-19 pandemic my current residence is in South Austin in an apartment alone. My solitude is precious.

Our Texas communities are encouraged to reemerge into the changed world. I am proud to be a resident of Austin. Today I live among neighbors, coworkers, social outreach groups, local school officials, and politicians who are open to and supportive of the LGBTQ+ community. Despite the presence of adversity, support for the LGBTQ+ community continues to grow. I feel confident that I will continue to heal from the effects PTSD has had on my life. Hopefully, when others find the courage to seek social support and the means to practice self-care, we will all share the mantra, "It lives with US."

Black is Beautiful Until it is Not: The Mental Health Struggle is Too Real

by Quinesha Bentley

“There are days—this is one of them—when you wonder what your role is in this country and what your future is in it. How, precisely, are you going to reconcile yourself to your situation here and how you are going to communicate to the vast, heedless, unthinking, cruel white majority that you are here. I’m terrified at the moral apathy, the death of the heart, which is happening in my country. These people have deluded themselves for so long that they really don’t think I’m human. And I base this on their conduct, not on what they say. And this means that they have become in themselves moral monsters.” - James Baldwin, 1963

“To be a Negro in this country and to be relatively conscious is to be in a state of rage almost, almost all of the time.” - James Baldwin, 1961

James Baldwin's quintessential voice reverberates how racial injustice captures the soul of everyday American life.

Two of the most gripping statements I’ve heard made are "I don't see color when I look at people" and "Racism does not exist anymore." The ignorance of these statements devalues the people who have been killed for merely existing. It allows society to believe in the pretense that everyone is equal. In the United States, skin color is as vital as RNA and DNA. It is the genetic code that birthed the most corrupt nation. Baldwin's quotes are essential in positioning the ways Black people attempt to reconcile themselves to the constant battle against terror and the constant experience of being dehumanized.

I want to hone in on some of the key words in Baldwin’s quotes: unthinking, cruel, conduct, and moral monsters. These keywords illustrate the Black experience and how the lineage of racial trauma that Black people have endured contributes to a negative mental health experience, which almost certainly leads to a mental health crisis.

Baldwin once stated, "the future of blacks in this country is precisely as bright or dark as the future of the country." This statement is salient because from the beginning, the identity of human creatures has been produced by societal factors that develop their social reality. Even as a Black woman living in one of the most diverse cities in the world, neither my education, intellect, looks, family, nor monetary means exclude me from the constant terror I have come to know as my reality. Sometimes the most terrifying aspect of it is knowing I have four brothers who are fathers and hard workers, but who could also be gunned down at any time. Their offense would be simple: merely existing. Other times, the terror comes from knowing I am a Black female. and along with countless other Black females, I know that the preferred currency in America remains my body, the Black body.

The effect of knowing my reality contributes to constant anxiety, depression, worry, and fear. It places me, like many other Black Americans, into a continuous mental turmoil. Mental health does not discriminate; it is not dependent on gender, income, status, race, or religion. It is solely based on a humanity that is encased in societal factors.

When George Floyd was murdered, I was working for a medical software company. Working for this company was horrific. Every day I felt like I was what Malcolm X described as "the house nigga," someone who must go along with what Massa says. If I were to disagree, there would be severe consequences.

While working there, I was forbidden to have a voice. My opinion did not matter because I was, and had always been, viewed as a "nigga." According to the company's vice president, to be working alongside white people in corporate America should be considered a privilege because, "You are lucky and should be grateful to have a job during COVID." It did not matter that I, too, am educated. I was labeled "other" and made to feel less than all my other white counterparts. On the day of Floyd's funeral, I asked the vice president if I could take half a day off, and she said, "No, it's not like you knew him." But regardless of whether I knew him or not, like me he was from Houston, and as they drove his casket around the city, I wanted to pay my respects by watching from my balcony. Unfortunately, this was forbidden. I remember my schedule full of

meetings and client training to ensure I would obey the long-standing master-slave relationship solidified within this country.

The following year I requested paid time off (PTO) on the Friday before the Martin Luther King, Jr. Day holiday. The vice president told me, "No, you already get one day off for that holiday. You don't need another." However, while traveling for work, another employee told me that she was still getting paid to see her sick mother despite having no more PTO. Malcolm X said it best, "You don't catch hell because you're a Baptist, you don't catch hell because you're a Methodist, Democrat, or Republican. You catch hell because you're a black man." The truth of his quote was apparent in my workplace.

My punishment was to train everyone on the team, including new employees and clients. I was required to travel on weekends with no compensation. I received two write-ups because my opinion differed from the vice president. I was made to stay in low-end hotels while other employees and the vice president stayed in more up-to-date lodging. While on a much-needed vacation, she hired her friend's employee because their company was struggling. When I came back to work, I was told, "You do not need to speak to him; he knows what to do." However, he sent countless emails asking me about his job details. And when he allowed things to go undone, it was me, the "angry Black woman," who was reprimanded. Above all, I was shown no respect or consideration when the continuing racial injustice of police brutality was right outside my window. Day in and day out, I was told, "Find a way to deal with it." I caught hell because I was Black on the team.

Working for this company exposed a moral sickness still lingering in America. While there, it was unacceptable to show any support or have any emotion for the individuals murdered in the name of "white rage." A white co-worker shared, "Everyone can see how she treats you, and it's not because you don't do your job. So, there is only one other reason." I experienced the vice president's "white rage" 100 times over.

On several occasions, I felt like Lupita Amondji Nyong'o's character, Patsey, in the film *Twelve Years A Slave*. Mrs. Epps, the slave master's wife, despised her for effortlessly being a Black diamond - something Mrs. Epps could never be. In one scene, Mrs. Epps slams a whiskey bottle

onto Patsey's head because her husband is enamored with her. Whether at internal meetings, external meetings, or client installations, the vice president always went out of her way to use her words to make me feel like a slave who needed to be whipped and placed back into subservience.

Anytime her name came across my phone or laptop, I instantly had chest pain. My chief complaints were stress, anxiety, and depression. The overall price I paid was losing 30 pounds in two months, which almost placed me, at 5'1" and 137 pounds, into the hospital.

One morning with a clear mind, I wrote my resignation letter. I did not hand it in, but I knew the moment was quickly approaching. I printed it and hung it on my refrigerator because in the world of Covid, finding a new position would be difficult - I had already been seeking a new job for about eight months. I read my resignation letter at least 30 times a day, each time with a different emotion. One day, without having found another job, I knew it was the day. I could no longer subject my mental health to such inhumane, bigoted oppression.

My experience taught me that self-care is not selfish. And in my case, neglecting my self-care has had long-term effects. Peace of mind is everything. And after the smoke and fire had subsided in terms of my recovery, I had to go through forgiving myself. And forgiving oneself can be the hardest part.

With the continuous police brutality, the worry about my brothers or myself being targeted, and my racist boss, I was sleep-deprived, stopped eating, and felt like my heart was always hurting. While working for the all-white company, I found that the omission of cultural acceptance and pluralism was one of the most constrained environments in which to excel. This bigoted partiality must be changed expeditiously if a positive and fruitful environment is sought.

Equity, justice, and rights depend upon us and others. Human beings use these words, however, how well they are put into practice depends on society. To some people, being Black means that you are not deserving of humanity, which is far from the truth. Being Black does not mean you work harder, can handle more, do not need time off, do not require maternity leave, or do not possess the same emotions as others.

Belonging to a historically excluded community due to my race was felt and shown in countless instances. I was made to feel constant disaffection and demoralization for the entire two years I worked for the company. And through it all, the ruinous and uncomfortable parameters for Blacks people. Regardless of the much-needed Black Lives Matter movement, the truth is that contrary to what lawmakers, employment organizations, and school institutions say, they act in the same ways as their forefathers. America has never believed in integration. And us Black people have the scars to prove it.

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Rage to Page

by Valerie Brown

As if drinking charcoal isn't bad enough, I stayed in the ICU for the next few days, not sure if I would live or die, if I would make it through this, or if I would go, gently passing as a lost spirit. Such was my mental state that day and, I would come to find out, for several more years to come.

It happened. I tried to end my life because my husband abandoned me after I became disabled. Because of this tragic ending to our blessed partnership and marriage, tears had come often - not quite often enough, though. As a person with clinical depression, I held everything inside, not because I wanted to, but because of the mental state I was in. I had a hard time crying and sobbing to release the extreme pain to my soul.

A sudden onset of severe peripheral neuropathy that left me bedridden and in severe pain and anguish was what led up to my husband's abandonment of me. My feet had swollen to nearly the size of balloons, leaving me with burning and stinging, a feeling of walking on nails, or worse, of walking on razor blades. Those sensations left me bedridden for months.

Having a history of nighttime brain seizures added to my state of worry about my health and future. Would I always be bedridden? In a wheelchair? Walking with braces? How would I cope with my poor eyesight - though not legally blind, almost so. What else could happen to me and why was this happening? The traumatic brain injury I suffered in a car crash years earlier had left a long-term effect on my brain health and neurological condition. Then came sudden doom, I thought, with the onset of neuropathy and brain seizures. Why all these after-effects years later - or were they even related at all to the brain injury?

The attempt to end my life seemed to be a culmination of these stressors and health conditions that were just too hard to handle. My husband had responded to my state of being bedridden by finding a girlfriend. She even texted me telling me I should "make decisions" with him - implying we divorce - the last thing I needed or wanted. He was my husband. For life. I never thought otherwise. But he felt differently, I came to discover - at the worst time in my life.

So here I was. In the ICU, after swallowing a bottle of pills and attempting to slash my wrists. Lonely. Scared. Hopeless. Sad. Bereft and hurt. What was I to do?

I had built my entire existence around him after many long single years, and after surviving a violent rape attempt at age 21. We had married when I was 37 after he responded to my Austin Chronical personal ad: "Wanted. Man. Period. End of Story.," an ad that incidentally won the personal ad of the week contest. He was 31. Six months later we married.

I reflected on our life together while in the ICU, a life in the country, with kittens, puppies, rose planting and cultivating, and hands-on landscaping of our five acres on a windy hill. That life ended by slamming into a concrete wall. Without a warning, our union shattered into a million pieces, just like the car windows shattered in my past car accident. Left feeling as though I too would shatter into a million pieces, I envisioned myself as someone in a horror story - in the middle of a mysterious vortex of sinister proportions.

I kept trying to figure things out. Why had this happened to me? To him? What were the main points of discord? I don't think I'll ever know. Maybe I'll just have to accept that he met another woman who filled his life in a way that I couldn't. Was he losing anything, I wondered. He acted as though he wasn't and was willing to metaphorically throw me in the trash.

I remembered hollow advice given to me prior to my attempt on my life by a well-meaning friend: "Get on with your life!" If only it were that simple. To me, divorce was The. Last. Nail. In. The. Coffin. The. End. Over. Finished. Though the divorce was completed, I felt that it was left dangling. Lingering, Haunting. Even after beginning to accept the "death" of our union (he stated he was never coming back and wanted nothing more to do with me,) I accepted the death inside me. Death of a life together.

His divorce attorney made nothing easier as he ran me out of house and home. I lost everything. Today this same attorney sits in federal prison for swindling from a Colombian drug lord, discovered after the FBI raided his office and shut down his business. My husband knew him because he was the brother of his supervisor at work - in the Organized Crime Division of the police department, ironically.

There had been times in the past when targets of police investigations followed me to and from work. It frightened me. And the list of other bizarre events seemed to be never-ending. Because of these events and because of my attempt on my life, it took weeks of outpatient therapy for me to even be able to form a sentence or hold on a conversation. Each day, while staying with my sister, the most I could do, besides sleeping all day and night was save enough energy for a few games of Scrabble.

Divorce from the person I thought was the love of my life came with a feeling that he had somehow died. And truthfully, he had. The sweet, supportive husband I knew had left his body. A new person had entered. Not a person I knew. I had to come to the point of telling myself that just as I had with the millions of pieces of shattered glass from my car accident and the millions of shattered pieces from my divorce, I could focus on their beautiful facets and their ability to glow and glitter in the sun. The shattered Coke-bottle-green sparkles had come from something tragic, and I believed I could too. I could become a new person as well. I could shed my old life and give it a farewell. I could move forward and shine. I could sparkle despite the millions of shattered pieces inside of me.

Me & the Illness

by Denise Grigsby

The descent downward was imperceptibly slow. Aunt Otha passed in late 2017. Then within a few sad months, in early 2018, Uncle Eddie passed away. Both were very dear to me. Both were integral to my support system. You see, I keep a list of my “essential workers,” loved ones who know me intimately and understand how the illness which I have lived with for over 30 years affects me. They are at-the-ready to lovingly help focus my racing thoughts, calm my anxious nerves, and comfort my disquieted soul. Helping me manage the illness is truly a difficult job for them and for me. It can get intense.

So, when my father left us in early 2019, I felt like the last beam of my well-constructed buttress of essential workers had crumbled. He had been much more than essential on my list; he was that wonderful father of mine. We talked several times a day. He would call me to make sure I did not sleep the day away in a depressed slumber. I would call him to see what he put in his oatmeal for breakfast. And there was the daily 4:00pm call to say: “Judge Judy’s on!”

I had been strong, though. I helped care for him until his peaceful and solemn final breath. I was distraught but comforted knowing that ours had been a special relationship. We had shared so much together – conversations, travels. Even the doctors’ visits and hospital stays during his final few months had come to be special times for us. I was forever Daddy’s Girl. Without that wonderful father of mine, without the love and humble wisdom of my Uncle Eddie, without the strengthening encouragement of my Aunt Otha, I slowly began the descent that comes along with the illness for me.

Yes, I was compliant with my medications. Yes, I was seeing my therapist regularly. But on it came like a yellow school bus, slowly driving its way through the neighborhood of my life picking up woes, the stressors increasing with each stop. And then the coronavirus pandemic struck a year later. It was just another woe picked up by the yellow school bus in my life.

My social structure began to cancel. I had enjoyed being an active member of the Houston Livestock Show and Rodeo for over 10 years, despite the illness. But the Rodeo was cancelled

due to the pandemic. I had depended on my weekly support group and its regular attendees to help me and the illness maintain stability. But all in-person groups citywide were cancelled due to the pandemic. The wheels on the bus continued rolling through my 'hood picking up woe after woe. Finally, by the end of 2020, the illness had taken over. I knew that I needed intensive professional mental help.

With most illnesses, acceptance and acknowledgement are all that is needed, then help comes quickly. But not so when it comes to mental illness. Plus, I am my own caretaker. I've learned not to allow myself to become too overtaken by the illness, too far gone, because I must be able to navigate the mental healthcare system as it currently exists.

And so, the calls began... "Do you accept Medicare?," because although I have Medicare coverage, it is not accepted by all mental health professionals or facilities.

"Do you have an intensive outpatient program (IOP)?," because I may be severely mood-compromised, but I refuse to be an inpatient at this time. My last inpatient stay included two nights without a pillow to put under my head. Four days and nights were spent without a functional commode in my room. I had to leave my room, walk down the hall to the nurses' station and wait for staff to escort me to the available toilet facilities in the padded cell. Traumatic. Frustrating. Infuriating. And for a patient on lithium drinking volumes of water, the trips to the padded cell day and night were many. So, IOP was my preference this time around, definitely not inpatient.

"Will I be under the care of a psychiatrist?," because I need medication management and possibly a medication change.

"Do you offer IOP online?" because I am extremely anxious and fearful of acquiring Covid. I do not want to be sitting around a group of people all day long in a small, stuffy, filthy room.

"Can I do the intake online?," because mental hospitals are disgustingly filthy, even the intake areas, which should be clean, fresh-smelling, attractive, and welcoming to new patients and their concerned loved ones.

"Will Medicare cover my treatment?"

"Will I have a co-pay?"

“How many days will be covered?”

“Can I pay my balance over time with a payment plan?” Because I am on a disability income due to the severity of the illness, I must closely monitor my budget.

Call after call, but the illness and I persevered until we found what we needed, a hospital that met all of my requirements. But now I had technical needs. My printer was down. My internet was not reliable. And I was completely out of paper! That old yellow bus of woes. Knowing that I would have a sizable, yet to be determined, hospital copay, I had to make a trip out into Covidville and purchase a new printer with a scanner (and paper) so that I could submit all required intake forms and print any daily handouts once I was a patient in the program. I also had to contact the cable company and get a plan that provided more reliable internet speed and service, something that proved to be a real necessity during lockdown.

These things I had to do while the illness was actively affecting my mood and behaviors. I was in online IOP for two months. Technically, it was a learning experience on both ends. But we made it work. And, thankfully, I was shored up enough to begin functioning once again.

My support groups soon began to be offered online. How wonderful! I completed an online program with Bo’s Place to help me deal with grief. Volunteer opportunities were available with the Rodeo that I could do at home and still feel that I was worthy enough to make a difference. And I updated my list of essential workers to ensure that I had the support I needed to deal with day-to-day anxieties. Once again, I felt loved.

Most importantly, after coming out of this particular episode, I could not help but be amazed. Amazed at ME and the ILLNESS! What strength we must have. To be able to ride that yellow bus, navigate those mental healthcare waters, cope with multiple devastating losses, endure a long-standing pandemic, and remain professional enough to negotiate for the care and treatment that I knew we needed. Yes, I said it. I feel it. I KNOW it. We are amazingly strong. I am not the illness. But every day, throughout each day, I live with, and deal with, and am linked to bipolar. And despite the disabling effects of the illness and medications, I am amazingly bright and strong.

The Shame of It All

by Loretta Henderson

For as long as I can remember I have suffered with anxiety and periods of depression. I am 68 years old now, so that is a long time. Only in recent years have I been aware this is a form of mental illness. Somehow, I believed worrying about things was just a part of living, and feeling sad was the by-product of my trials. I recollect thinking that if I worried about something, somehow, I could control or fix it- whatever the “it” was at the time. There was always an “it.” I grew up in the Third Ward neighborhood of Houston, Texas with a single mother and a deaf sister. The house was quiet with no one to talk to or play with since Mom worked the graveyard shift making, I am sure, less than a livable wage. My father lived in Louisiana, and I recall him sending \$25.00 in child support for two children. Even though that was almost 70 years ago I was aware something was wrong with that picture.

Today, I am involved in a financial literacy group and a senior citizen learning about financial sustainability with the goal of being prepared for any emergency. One of the main things I have learned is that I have a financial history that involved poor money management. That story goes all the way back to my mother telling me to tell the “rent man” that “She ain’t here.” I still remember the feeling of shame and guilt and, many times, anger.

My father was an only child living the good life in Louisiana. My sister and I were shipped off to Louisiana every summer and major holidays. This was the compromise, I’m sure, for my father to continue with college and not marry my mother. My grandparents were loving, church-going folks who made sure we knew something about God. Such as: we could dance every day of the week but Sunday. Even as a girl I felt this did not make sense. It was particularly confusing because my grandparents ran a little café that served burgers and sodas and we woke up to music playing in the jukebox.

My grandmother was the “church musician” in that small country town. So, we were made to come along to every service, funeral, revival, and wedding. One summer Sunday morning when I was eight years old, my grandmother was taking a bath when suddenly someone ran into the

café yelling about a fire in the building a couple of doors up from us. I started crying and hollering for my grandmother. She told me to stop crying and call out to the church where my grandfather and the other deacons were having Sunday school and financial meetings. I still can hardly tell this story without feelings of anxiety: I later learned that it was the Ku Klux Klan who started the fire. I remember my grandmother handed us over to some townspeople who took us across the highway where we joined other people from across the railroad tracks. I know today that my grandmother went back into the house to get money she had stored in the chifforobe (better known as an armoire by recent standards). I still remember when I realized she had gone back into the house, I tried to run across the highway and get her. Someone grabbed me and held me so tight I was angry. Finally, she came out and she, my sister, and I watched as Mr. Williams' barbershop burned down along with the old rooming house next door. The story goes that the old rooming house used to be a house for working women back in the day.

The fire was put out before it made it to our house, and we all went back inside. My grandparents and other townspeople sat in the café and discussed what had happened. The telephone rang and the caller said, "Tell Geneva – she's next." Of course, I started crying again while they all stood over me yelling, "What's wrong? What did they say? Who was it?" Yelling at a traumatized eight-year-old. To this very day yelling is a major trigger for me. In the days following there was lots of whispering. I remember my grandfather getting his shotgun and keeping it near the door.

Even though all the grownups were whispering among themselves, no one thought it was important to talk to the children – at least not to me. I was worried, anxious, and angry, and left to figure it out on my own. I often think of the irony that my grandparents operated that little café that provided a place for Black people in the community to go to socialize, get a good little hamburger, listen to music, and enter through the front door. There was a café located uptown but Black people were served only through the back door. And so, the Klan decided to try to burn down our little place in the community.

As I observed today's racial injustices, particularly during the last two years, I spent a lot of days in tears, revisiting that Sunday in Louisiana. As I watched the George Floyd killing and the Breonna Taylor funeral during the shutdown, I relived that scary Sunday and that threatening phone call. At one time during this unrest, I had to travel to Louisiana to my hometown. My anxiety was off the scale unlike the many other hundreds of times I had driven that same highway. This time I feared a police officer or sheriff in one of those little country towns would pull me over. I remember telling a couple of friends to be on alert in the event of a problem. It is so hard to believe that at 68 years old I can be so traumatized by that little eight-year-old girl's experience. Some of my biggest concerns and fears are that my anxiety and periods of depression will become so paralyzing I will not be able to get out of it. The pandemic and isolation caused by the shutdown compounded the anxiety I was experiencing. My recovery includes self-care, service to others, a spiritual connection, and resilience. As a person residing in Texas my experience is particularly relevant because my mother boarded a Greyhound bus to bring my deaf sister and I to Texas for a better life.

Heaven Knows a Black Single Mother's Prayers During the Pandemic

by Alicia Beatrice Hicks

Once upon a time there lived a Black family of four: a husband, wife, and two boys who moved from Houston to Austin for a better life. The woman did everything to be a good wife including much self-sacrifice. She fought as hard as she could to keep them together in their own little bubble protecting them from the world of their trauma triggers. But the transition to a new city and new life couldn't keep them together. The husband and wife grew apart. Then they quit. The wife became a divorcee and the kids fatherless.

As a Black single mother, she was doing her best living in Austin with small-town vibes that weren't cozy enough and with inflation caused anxiety and frustration. She was adjusting to a new city's gentrification although she enjoyed its disguise of progressiveness. She was healing her childhood and generational trauma only to find more trauma created from a major move that was supposed to change her family's attitude about peace and love. In the end, God showed her how love transcends, and she hoped her story would help others.

The fatherless kids grew weary of moving from apartment to apartment as the mother searched for stability, mercy, and God's grace. They grew weary of changing schools, natural disasters, and leaving their home in Houston with three bedrooms. They grew weary of mold from water leaks and living in hotels during Winter Storm Uri.

Let's rewind to a visit to Houston after the husband quit but before the pandemic hit. The mother could not forget her children but the unforeseen happened: COVID-19. Her two sons had to stay with their grandmother in Houston for months until it was safe to return to Austin because they were uncertain how the pandemic would affect them. So, she took the risk of staying here alone to work. Later, they would reminisce about the days when they were a family with a husband and a daddy, when they were happy and had more support.

But this story is about how their mental health was impacted by the pandemic, by race-related trauma, and by heightened injustice. Prior to the pandemic, in the first neighborhood they moved into, race was the main issue the family dealt with. Their Blackness was a threat to old South Austin's humanity yet love always wins.

When her husband left, she was left alone to heal. Therapy, prayer, and self-care so she could feel because her history of trauma seemed severe. Relieved that she could start over again alone and left with her work, her journey to practice radical self-love and acceptance began. She was armed with a new faith that the “better life” she had hoped for still would come for her family.

In the beginning they were all in this together, this COVID-19 thing; washing their hands, social distancing, and wearing masks. It became their pop culture. She participated in committees to judge artists' creative works to encourage and motivate them. She expressed her worldview on diversity, equity, and inclusion in the workplace. She was a hybrid team player - two days a week at home and three at work - so she wasn't alone. Months passed until at last she started to dream again of marital bliss. Her divorce was almost final. She decided to give online dating a try. After only one date she didn't feel closer to completing her family. She got honest about her desire to explore what being single meant after being married for almost nine years. “No one's serious online anyway,” she thought after reviewing her growing collection of stranger danger messages only asking for hookups or the socially awkward one sentence/one-word conversations. She gave up online dating.

Born on the day of a category three hurricane, her 38th birthday was near. She'd already planned a trip to Greece to celebrate and eat a good feast. But when the pandemic began, Europe closed its borders for safety and relief. She had to rain check Greece and wait. Luckily it was her fate to travel to Mexico to practice her Spanish, see wonderful shows, practice yoga by the beach, and feel like a human again. What a relief! She was a phenomenal Black woman, celebrated and not hated outside America. Enjoying fresh island cuisines and observing romantic couples was refreshing. She received a call that her paternal aunt died while she was on that trip. She had to grieve and celebrate at the same time but knew God was still in control. She returned with a renewed spirit, relaxed and ready.

Again, life happened. She had to have major surgery and care for her children while recovering. It was a battle, but online learning helped their school journey until they could go in person again and see their new friends. Then after her divorce was final, she met the love of her life.

Yes, they'd met online because she gave online dating a chance again. She fell in love instantly because God told her that he was heaven sent. He was supposed to be her lifelong friend. But he broke her heart time and time again. He didn't choose her, so she thought it was his fate that he lose her. She gave him positive regard speaking affirmations over his life, so he'd one day change his way and hopefully be a better person. That's how she left humans anyway, with kindness.

Without the emotional support she and her kids were used to from their daddy and ex-husband, she struggled. Black single parenting in Austin during a pandemic was hard. Too many things to navigate alone: natural disasters like Winter Storm Uri, moving, elementary school, figuring out work and school drop off and pickup, a second job teaching online, growing an online business because she couldn't let her dreams die, finding a new job when her grant-funded job ended, still getting used to a new city even after living there for a few years, being spiritually exhausted, feeling like there were too many unanswered prayers, starting therapy again to find support for her challenging needs, and constantly reinventing ways to find mindfulness in a smaller living space than her family was used to. However, there was no regret. With a renewed mindset, she was determined to see what God's plan would be for her family of three. She'd have to wait - not forever, but for a little while longer, until she didn't have to be a strong Black woman and do it alone.

Instead, she would embrace her family's resilience and brilliance while thriving in a pandemic with her faith. Doors were opening for her to sing, write, and grow her online business, while she continued to teach her Black sons that they were light. With an open mind, she would keep her eyes open to meeting new people so she could learn and grow. One day she'd be found, and her prayers answered for the real love of her life to stick around, make her his wife, and be the father her sons truly desired. They'd go higher and evolve together as a new family.

I wrote this story in third person yet, the blessings in these lessons of transition and resilience during the pandemic are about the power of having a village. Having a strong support system of real friends and family - a trusted village of kinfolks whether new or true (biological) is key to

sustaining and preserving your mental health. That's what I am building. I hope our families and village continue to grow whole and healthy.

A Season of Restoration

By Stephanie Jack

The other day as I was on Instagram, mindlessly scrolling, chuckling to myself at all the people and animal antics, a reel by @africachanneltv caught my attention. In the video, a young African woman is sitting outside of a hut on a bright sunny day while an older African woman is rubbing a deep yellow buttery-looking substance all over the young woman's arms. It could be a scene between granddaughter and grandmother. The young woman is limp with relaxation, while the older woman slathers this golden butter all over her arms and then her hair, all the while looking lovingly at her, reciting some prayer, blessing or life affirming message over her – at least that's the story I told myself.

Later in the same video, a small group of village women are seen joining in the shea butter bath of the young woman; they are massaging the rich emollient into her arms, hair, and legs. The women sing and dance as if they are celebrating the young woman and themselves. And me. In a world far away from that village scene, the video of this African American woman connected me to memories from my childhood.

Any time I'd suffer a scrape or cut, my mother's or grandmother's prescription was always the same: "Go put some cocoa butter on it so it won't leave a mark." Every cut, scrape, or hot comb burn on my ear led to a mad search around the house for the alternative to a first aid kit, the cocoa butter. Watching that video, I remembered all the times I have sat at the knees of girls or women as they "scratched my head" and "greased my scalp" and combed and braided my hair. I have to tell you, after the past couple of years of the pandemic and all its fall out, my battered soul could use a slathering on of a warm, soothing balm from rough loving hands. My mind, body, and soul need intensive tending to.

Since at least March of 2020, without even realizing it, I have been unconsciously holding my breath, clenching my jaws, and resting my earlobes on hiked up, tense shoulders. I could use some ISC - Intensive Self-Care. I am not the only one.

For some, the pandemic highlighted the racial inequities and violence that Black communities have suffered for generations. For others safe and sound in privileged worlds distant from the

daily grind of workplaces left exposed to the dangerous virus, the pandemic just seemed to be this terrible inconvenience that could be managed from the relative safety of home.

Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that. -Martin Luther King

We are now a few weeks into the start of 2022, and I find myself still feeling quite reflective about the events of the past year - actually, the events of the past two years. To say the year 2020 and its fraternal twin 2021 have been challenging, would be the understatement of the century as far as I am concerned. It certainly feels that way. The COVID-19 pandemic has spotlighted the racial and ethnic disparities in health care against a backdrop of racial and social justice issues which could no longer go unseen by the larger society. But as I look ahead to the coming months of 2022, I am reminded that every generation has faced tremendous challenges, obstacles, even pandemics, and somehow moved forward in the face of tremendous odds and collective trauma.

Next month is Black History or African American History Month, and the theme for 2022 is "Black Health and Wellness." This theme is everything I am, everything I sometimes struggle to maintain, and everything I am passionate about. There are so many issues that pertain to Black folks' health and wellness, from the high maternal mortality rate among Black mothers, to the generational wealth gap, to the barriers and stigmas around seeking mental health and substance use care.

As I reflect on the state of my own health and wellness, I re-dedicate myself to the self-care practices that I have developed using my Wellness Recovery Action Plan (WRAP) and to sharing the benefits of WRAP with others in my wellness community.

In the updated edition of the WRAP "Red Book," wellness is defined as, "having a purpose in life, being actively involved in satisfying work and play, being part of joyful relationships, having a healthy body and living environment, and experiencing happiness. Wellness doesn't necessarily imply the absence of physical illness or impairment, or the lack of a behavioral health diagnosis. Anyone can experience wellness within their current life circumstances."

Absolutely. I have learned that it just helps when you have a plan to achieve and maintain your sense of well-being.

This past year, I have leaned into every aspect of my WRAP, using it to help myself navigate the stresses of working as an essential worker or caring for myself as I undergo breast cancer treatments. My “wellness toolbox” focused on a few simple activities that bring me joy, peace, and balance. It included my binge-worthy TV shows and favorite music (Megan Thee Stallion, anyone?!) and awkwardly learning TikTok dance moves. My word search book was my go-to tool during my chemo treatments –it’s a wonderful, time-consuming distraction. I used work-related wellness tools like getting gas for my car the night before work or using my paid time off (PTO) days to help me manage work stress and COVID anxiety. By having an intentional way of paying attention to myself, like WRAP, I was able to help myself avoid experiencing a mental health crisis this past year.

In addition to leaning into my wellness plan, I also leaned into key recovery concepts like self-advocacy, personal responsibility, and support. I reached out to people I trusted and set limits with others when I needed space. When my treatment team and I recognized I needed a break from work in order to attend to myself, I spoke up and my workplace supported my time off to recover. I am learning to prioritize my self-care and proudly own it, just as tennis star Naomi Osaka and Olympic gymnast Simone Biles unapologetically stepped back from their sports on the world stage to care for their mental health.

As we observe Black History Month 2022, I invite everyone to re-imagine your personal healing journey and every dimension of your wellness. Let’s commit to the well-being of all people and focus our efforts on making meaningful changes within our own lives and communities.

Sharing a Story of a Loved One

by Nora Jones

A close loved one of mine has been adversely affected by injustice instead of being seen as a victim who was taken advantage of due to his warm and kind heart. Although he opened his doors to someone seeking refuge, he was seen as the perpetrator in his own home.

My loved one fights for his peace of mind and struggles to find balance while living with mental health conditions, seizures, and other health issues. I admire him so much. He has come so far after the trauma of his father death when he was a child. Although he has made his share of mistakes in life and spent time in prison, he has changed for the better.

He works at Wendy's and is a dedicated employee. He even told me he wanted to go back to school with the help of a program that Wendy's offers to pay for employees to pursue their educational goals. My brother also juggles day labor shifts. Whenever he can get an opportunity to work, he takes it and runs. He helps the elderly and disabled at a senior and disabled housing community by taking their groceries to their homes and helping them with other tasks.

When one of the elderly ladies in his apartment complex found out he worked at Wendy's making hamburgers, she requested he cook a hamburger for her. My mom wanted to know why he didn't just bring her a burger home from work. He told her, with a sense of pride, "She likes it when I cook her hamburgers at my house." The children in the family just love him. My niece always wants to play with and hang out with her uncle. Even though he does not have kids, he loves them as if they were his own.

It hurts the family to know he was labeled as a perpetrator of domestic violence when they know that he was the one crying out for help. My other brother's girlfriend told us that it was the woman he married who was the aggressor. And she was the one who played cupid and introduced her to my brother.

My brother decided to let the woman he married back into his home again after she said she had no place to live and was stranded. He has lived in this apartment for a few years and has not added anyone else to his lease. But within months, he was ordered by a judge to stay away

from his apartment because she called the police and said she lived there. Actually, they were separated. My brother told me her goal was to get him kicked off his housing voucher program. He qualified for the program because of having been homeless at one point, having a low income, and having severe disabilities.

The family did not feel at peace during their wedding. My mother told me she thought it was abnormal for them to be all over each other before the judge could even start the ceremony for the vows to be said and honored. The judge said she had never seen any couple act the way they did. Before the wedding, my brother would tell me he did not want to get married.

Whenever asked about their wedding reception plans, he would act strangely and look at his fiancé. She would respond in an aggressive tone saying, "We are going to P.F. Chang's."

During a family dinner within two months after getting married, my brother repeatedly said he did not want to be married. I told him it was not too late to get out of the marriage. My aunt said the same thing to him and gave him the option to get the marriage annulled.

My brother has been in jail since June 2022 for the second time due to the allegations of domestic violence. He has not been charged but is still struggling with the adverse effects of being unable to work or pay the rent and fees accumulating every month. I am taking on his financial obligations even though I am barely making it on my own.

I bailed him out the first time he was sent to jail. He was not able to pay his attorney's fees due to other financial responsibilities and not receiving help from the woman he married. She abused him by taking advantage of him financially. She pressured him to finance a car because she demands he takes her around. The first time he was arrested they were ordered to stay away from each other. He was able to do this successfully until she called and asked him to pick her up because she was stranded and needed somewhere to stay.

My brother received an eviction notice last month and his car was repossessed. I had to come up with the money to pay his rent because he is still in jail and his case has been changed by his court-appointed attorney. This situation has been a struggle for the entire family (mentally, financially, and physically). I cannot afford to take on any more debt in order to get him out of jail. The family was able to pay his rent for August 2022.

He has had several seizures while in jail. I am not sure if he can access his medication or if there is a fee for him to get his medication to treat his mental health condition. The last time I spoke with my brother he was considering divorce. The family cannot make him do anything when it comes to his marriage, but I would like to see him happy. True love does not hurt or abuse anyone in any way.

I have learned that sometimes men are abused by women (mentally, physically, and financially). Unfortunately, men who are survivors of domestic violence are not seen as victims. They are often ignored and not taken seriously because of the stigma of males being tough and incapable of being abused by women. With all my brother has been through in life, he has overcome so many obstacles and I am so proud to call him my big brother. I am hurt to hear about his current situation and would like to let it be known that men can be victims of domestic violence. They deserve to be seen and served just like any other survivor.

Bodies of People We Know

by Stephanie Konvicka

It happens this way: there is everyone and then there is no one. The park where I work, a park that has been bustling with programs, play, and people, becomes suddenly empty. Community members draw inward, protective, and fearful. An uneasy quiet, not restful, settles over the grounds. There is everyone and then there is no one.

Then slowly, one by one, people begin to come back. Fearfully and with caution, quietly, as if nature itself is the threat. This is the park's first Spring with a new garden, and we work long days exhausting our bodies. We prepare planting beds, sow seeds, and tend the fertile soil that holds years and years of rich history. The nutrients deposited after years of river floodings have been creating fecund soil that lay dormant and untouched until now. We prepare and plant and tend as though our collective lives depend upon not just the fruit this garden will bear, but the joy and hope it might inspire.

People come to eat lunch, to walk, to play, to be near and distanced simultaneously. The greetings over the garden fence are often shy, eyes averted. And then slowly, there are smiles and short conversations. We begin to find a sense of normalcy in these daily interactions. We greet neighbors by name. They comment on what is growing and how lush our garden is becoming. We hear memories of my grandma's garden and old wives' tales of how to grow prize winning tomatoes. There are gifts of seedlings, and our garden becomes a patchwork quilt of sorts, marking Helen's Celosia, Lupe's peppers, and whatever else someone wants to share. But there is never saying "thank you," because gardeners say that's bad luck. Always, there is lament over squash bugs and/or giant zucchini that won't stop producing. We begin to find a purposeful rhythm and ease in this most uncommon time.

Then the playground becomes a threat. City workers show up one morning and methodically circle each piece of equipment with yellow caution tape and again, where there were once squeals of delight and play, it is now quiet and still. We watch through the window. Though the sun shines brightly on this beautiful Spring morning, we feel as though a light has gone out. A lifeline is cut, and we are yet again, set adrift in the unknown.

Spring goes on and the vegetables and flowers in the garden begin to flourish. What once was just lawn, becomes a verdant haven for lizards, welcoming pollinators, and people alike. We spend that first Spring in the garden carefully and lovingly tending vegetables and flowers, as if it is an altar and the plants are an offering of sorts to a desperately struggling community. Again, the people come back one or two at a time, walking slowly past, offering a shy wave, a soft hello. In time, they circle closer. They stoop low, looking a little closer and closer still. The looking becomes a sort of opening and the opening, a connection. Then stories come. Loss of jobs, of health, of life, of connection, of hope. Family situations and circumstances in a community intimately familiar with disaster, becoming more fractured, more dire. Words like hopeless tumble from trembling lips, eyes downcast, the shame of struggle adding weight to an already heavy burden of survival. There is always shame. It is in averted, downcast eyes, in slumped shoulders and every sentence that starts with, "I should be able to...." Should be able to what? We always ask. Who says this should be easier? Who says your burden isn't heavy? Your fears aren't justified?

We've heard this before in the wake of flood after flood, before the one that changed everything for so many of us, Hurricane Harvey. This community, these neighbors are so intimately familiar with disaster, loss, and heartache. These people, so determined and resilient, thinking they should be able to cope better than...whom? Someone not in their position? The reminder is always there: when we start with less, there's so much more to lose. As intimately familiar as our neighbors are with disaster, this particular disaster is a mystery we are discovering together.

The trauma triggered after so many floods, is unable to work itself out through necessary and therapeutic action, the purposeful movement of response and recovery. Sitting alone on the porch in our park one day, struggling to name a feeling, I ask myself, what does this feel like? I realize it feels like the days before our river spilled over the banks and flooded our low-lying neighborhoods. But this rising action has no crest in sight. It is an unending anticipation. Unsustainable over time. We begin to wonder, what will the fallout be? Bodies. The garden conversation turns to bodies. Sick, dying, sometimes healing, carrying anguish and burdens.

There are those for whom the weight is so heavy, they choose instead to lay down their own lives. What is the toll of a pandemic on a small community? It is the grief we carry because the numbers are bodies and here, in this place, these are bodies of people we know.

Eleven months into the pandemic, while making dinner on a Tuesday evening, I casually ask how someone is doing. My husband tilts his head, casting an eye in my direction and says, "He died. Remember?" I stop slicing my tomato for a moment. Oh, yeah. I forgot. This is it, I decide. This is the fallout. In counting cases, we haven't yet counted the cost. But we carry the weight of loss, seen and unseen, tucked away somewhere dark and inaccessible. I'll deal with this later. I don't have time right now. This is what we say about our grief and fear after every disaster. Not right now.

So, we wait for Spring. For days filled with long golden sunlight. For cool mornings and warm days. For signs of tender life springing forth in a little garden in a park. For our offerings to bear fruit in this place we have made an altar. For tiny caterpillars, eating, eating, eating their way toward transformation. We wait. Every chrysalis filled, not just with a small miracle of transformation, but hope for us, as well. We wait. Bending low, searching, we delight in the smallness of new life. In bearing witness to transformation, to new life, to the miracle of soil birthing life, we dare to hope, together.

Turning Points

by Meghan Lowrey

I watched my tears fall and mingle with the water moving towards the drain as I sat on the shower floor, my head on my knees and my arms holding my legs pressed to my chest. It was my third or fourth breakdown of the day, and the only reason I was in the shower at all was to mask the sounds of my sobbing; though, I knew I had trained myself to weep silently by then so as not to disturb others. The warmth of the water spattering down upon me brought no comfort this time, and it was in that moment, alone and ashamed, that I realized I needed to seek help for my mental health.

I wish I could say everything changed in that moment, that the epiphany transformed the waters into the comforting presence they once were, that I got myself up and steamed full speed ahead towards a path of healing, but that simply was not the case. Knowing that I needed help was nothing new for me, but finally deciding that I was going to put in the work to seek that help was—and I was terrified. I wasn't sure where to start, or if I could be helped at all, or if I was even worth helping. It had taken so long to get myself to that point, and I honestly didn't know if I had it in me to change the path I was on. But I had a friend who started therapy that week, and her courage gave me strength.

Thinking about it now, I can't directly pinpoint the moment things started to get too dark for me in the way I can tell you about the moment in the shower when I decided to seek some light. It was more of a slow burn, but it had begun to feel suffocating. I had been struggling with anxiety and depression since I was young, but it intensified when I entered graduate school. Since I grew up in an environment shrouded with physical and mental abuse, I had never been able to accept that I had any worth at all. For me, it was clear that my admittance to graduate school was a fluke, and I honestly felt guilty that I had fooled people into thinking that I was worth investing in. Imposter syndrome hit me hard, and I think that is when I first felt myself change.

It was like I had stepped in some kind of toxic sludge—thick, black goop weighing me down and making it harder to keep moving forward. And with each grant rejection, each mistake, each

time I listened to others so eloquently describe their project while I struggled to formulate even the most basic of explanations, the sludge spread and grew heavier.

So, by the time 2020 rolled around, I was already knee-deep in a depression tar pit, and as each new catastrophe flashed across my news feed, I felt the sludge rise higher and higher. Australia and then California were literally on fire; I sunk. Harvey Weinstein got a guilty verdict while I got yet another reminder of my past trauma; I sunk. Ruth Bader Ginsburg passed; I sunk. Each story of suffering brought with it a wave of deep sorrow, always on the precipice of becoming completely overwhelming. Anxiety and guilt acted as anchors, and as I learned about each new event, the anchors grew heavier, dragging me down until I felt completely enveloped by the sludge.

Covid-19 played a pivotal role in my descent. Having asthma, I started to genuinely fear the world outside the walls of my apartment. Every encounter with a person was now potentially life-threatening. I took every precaution, but there was no way to know if I would be safe since we knew so little about the virus that was moving through the planet leaving unbelievable devastation in its wake. I did not leave my apartment for almost two years; the terror of contracting or spreading the virus kept me huddled in the pit, slowly smothering in the sludge. My closest family members were considered “essential” workers, constantly in contact with the community, and they could not afford or were unable to work remotely. Worse yet, many others were not taking the situation seriously. How could anyone be safe if others weren’t taking precautions? How could my loved ones avoid the wave of death sweeping the nation? My anxiety would literally leave me shaking. The guilt I felt for being blessed to still have a job—let alone one where I could work from home—while so many others were forced into a position of exposure or unemployment, would send me spiraling. Why should I, who was worth nothing, be protected when others were not?

The guilt grew as I watched people protest for racial justice, those brave individuals enduring abuse to proclaim that Black Lives Matter. They took action as I hid from Covid. I did what I could from home, helping to form a student anti-racism group, but I still feel guilty about my inability to overcome my fears and take my support to the streets. Watching the suffering

coming from every angle, knowing I couldn't do anything to help anyone—or maybe I could have but just wasn't strong enough to do so—brought me to such a dark place that I essentially gave up on myself. I wasn't helping anybody. I wasn't worth anything. I was still undeservedly safe inside my walls.

The sludge was so heavy that I often just didn't want to move. I didn't want to get out of bed; I didn't want to shower; I didn't even want to brush my teeth. And things kept getting worse. I became estranged from family members who adamantly opposed BLM. My mother contracted Covid, and though she thankfully had no long-term effects, my anxiety worsened. My campus went back to in-person scheduling, and I lived in a constant state of panic.

Then the state I lived in passed an extreme anti-abortion bill, and my anxiety heightened again. Bodily autonomy is a foundation of human rights, and my state was stripping that away. I, myself, have a genetic condition that will not prevent me from conceiving but that I fear passing on. And while I am hypervigilant about pregnancy prevention, knowing that I have limited control over my body terrifies me. Similarly, I fear for my queer friends who do not need or use contraceptives; friends who cried with me as we face a world where a rape could result in forced childbirth. I shake as I type this because the fear is palpable in a reality so unpleasant. It was all too much, and that day in the shower I knew that if I let it, the sludge would consume me.

It took three weeks of me calling my mental health services department and hanging up before I was able to set up an appointment. But I did eventually find the strength, largely due to the constant support of a friend who knew I was struggling. The experience has been life changing. I started therapy, joined group classes to learn more about coping techniques, and started my journey with medication to help treat my anxiety and depression.

Each fact I learned and each time I talked through my fears and concerns, I could feel the sludge sloughing off. It wasn't all at once, and sometimes I felt that addressing my fears and trauma created more anxiety. But things were different because I had a support system of nonjudgmental professionals who understood, listened, and helped develop a care plan that

made me comfortable. I started to realize that I do matter; that I'm not nothing or unworthy of love; that I am allowed to love myself; that I deserve the effort to maintain my care.

Don't get me wrong, I'm not completely out of the pit. It's just that now I have the tools to help me wade in the shallow end instead of drowning again. I am still anxious, and I still struggle with new events marked by suffering, but now I know how to address my anxiety; I have the tools to stop myself from spiraling back into the sludge.

My growth could not have happened without the help of others, and I hope everyone knows that help is available and that others do care. I cannot stress enough how important it is to take that first step, even if it's hard. I did, and now I can leave the house without having a panic attack. That would've been impossible a year ago. This wasn't easy to write or reflect on, but I hope that in doing so, somebody may get that same spark that I got when a friend told me they started their mental health journey. Taking care of yourself can be hard, but it is worth the effort, and so are you.

Personal Grace Giver

by Teresa Lyons

To keep it simple and very real: I must extend to myself an extreme allowance of grace while dealing with my life and living in this society for over 50 years.

I bid you greetings from a personal grace giver from Texas. While writing this I begin to reflect on my 51 years of life as an African American daughter, sister and descendent of strong, amazing, and loving African American ancestors. Being a wife and mother of three beautiful African American children, a daughter and two sons, comes with extreme joy and a bit of stress beyond typical parenting as a Black mother. You see this grace I give myself is necessary for me to maintain my sanity and get a break from depression, panic attacks, anxiety, and night terrors during this ungracious season of sickness (the pandemic) and constant discussions and images of racial injustice and inequities.

I never imagined that I would see people have more compassion and support for animals than they do humans. I must be patient with myself when I am constantly on the verge of crying from witnessing videos of harm and killing of unarmed black men, women, and children -- modern day lynchings – and from watching society finding ways to justify these injustices. I often fight back feelings of anger when I witness the lack of basic human rights needed by people during all seasons of life, such as access to proper and affordable medical care, fair and accessible living wage jobs, and quality food and housing. Food deserts are made by systems and corporations, not poor people.

Please respect that my perspective is my perspective, and my feelings are my own. This pain and anger I feel is at times uncomfortable to discuss, yet we must talk about issues of racial injustice, racism, and disenfranchisement to resolve these issues. As long as there is denial of America's history of slavery, Jim Crow, and the like, we will be unable to resolve these issues. We must talk about all of it: the good, the bad, and the ugly. I extend grace to myself to be able to handle ugly truths that must be faced as part of my personal healing and sanity, not anyone else's. This gracious writing expresses my perspective as a living and breathing Black wife and mother dealing with the stress and occasional fear I have for my family and loved ones, and

with the anxiety I have for young, law-abiding African American citizens who are deemed threatening and having lives of no value.

You might say, “Well, teach them to pull their pants up, not wear hoodies, cut their hair, and speak proper English (whatever that means). Then, they won’t have any problems.” Yet, when I watch the news and read different reports and even listen to my children sharing encounters about how teachers, professors, and even our community treats them poorly for simply living their lives as Black people, I feel insulted and angry. I get these feelings while simply going for a walk in my own neighborhood where I pay taxes, or driving home from church and hearing, “Go home nigger.” I feel disappointed by the fact that many of my children's classmates at a predominantly white school feel they can refer to them as their “nigger friend.” I feel increased stress, paranoia, and worry when my son wants to take an early morning or late evening jog. I feel increasing concern that someone will harass him or accuse him of a crime just because of the mere color of his skin.

I had to start understanding that although being Black and being a woman anywhere in America comes with its individual challenges, and that I will survive and persevere, regardless of the many, Black, and white, who want to see my demise. I will continue to give myself grace and extend grace to others until they receive it and learn how to do the same. It saddens me that the hate in this world will never end, regardless of different laws and mandates. I had to learn and sadly accept that you can’t legislate morality, ethics, or values. We can only give consequences when they are violated. We see clearly that the people who have hate in their hearts while in the same breath they say they want society to be great don’t understand that the hate they carry will tear this nation apart.

No grand structure has ever been established and maintained with a weak and corrupt foundation. With this grace that I give myself, I talk boldly and freely to my children and to others about strengthening their inner selves so that they might handle the grim reality of so many people believing wrong to be right until they go to the grave. This will be our saving grace. I work diligently to speak the truth in love and share that I have no time for hate in my heart for no person. I chose daily to not to waste energy and time hating others. It is a

conscious choice I am faced with day in and day out without provocation. This is a conversation that will go on and on if anyone is willing to have it.

It is a conversation of extending grace to our white and even Black counterparts as a few are willing to come to the table. Everyone must be willing to acknowledge the woes and wrongs of this world with an openness in order to come to some solutions. I have decided to extend grace to those that look like me that have believed that their thinking and beliefs about the poor and disenfranchised is okay when it's not. I have had to be honest with myself and accept that this thinking affected me too.

I have extended acceptance and grace to those that don't even want to discuss their personal race hatred for themselves. Yes, you may have noticed that I mentioned other African Americans. This is due to the fact that many of us have accepted the lies and hatred of this nation as truth.

The injustices and inequalities that have been continually heaped upon our people in this nation are very real. I am talking about all human beings, all people being treated with decency, honor, and respect. There are constant internal battles about what is right, fair, or just that can and does affect the mental health of many, including myself. Even harder to discuss is the fact that if I hate myself, don't like myself, and see the image in the mirror as the one many have hated, criminalized, and equated with being evil, then this very state of being can and will rattle the mental wellbeing of any person. So, grace I give and grace I freely receive.

Vipassana, Writing, and the Pandemic

by Antonio McDonald

I. Loneliness

Often times, the universal fact of man's eternal loneliness disrupts my night –without warning– and imposes itself on my sleep. My very flawed attempts to deal with my loneliness once involved an unacceptance of it, but slowly became a catalyst for the contemplation of art, a deep reading of literature, an embracing of being alone, and even spending time thinking about death. Our entire earthly experience is shaped through how we deal with this universal fact. Many people attempt to suppress knowledge of it and hide within ideas of immortality, holding tightly to possessions, and must discover late in life–often on the death bed or when possessions and accolades can no longer be a substitute for despair– that life must be appreciated and treated with the utmost presence and respect. It is not new for man to escape into mass movements, altered consciousness, and church to rid themselves of the fear of death. But while we run from ourselves this fear we repress becomes the dragon that needs to be conquered.

The world ceased to move during the pandemic. For years, Americans especially, talked of the exhaustion from overworking. Then, suddenly we were all thrown onto our couches and had to acknowledge the strangers living in our house. And I am not merely speaking of spouses, kids, or even the dog, but ourselves. We were forced into a state of self-examination merely from having the time. We were bound to eventually discover the depth of our disconnection, the barrier distracting us from becoming closer to ourselves, and feel the pain of our illusions at the root of our suffering.

The pandemic had moments of intense paranoia and isolation, but it also provided a space that allowed for revelation. It allowed me to dig into myself and discover the universal connection between every man. Ernest Hemingway discovered this connection through bullfighting and fishing, Louis Armstrong found it through concertos and riffs, Yogananda found it by contemplating the creation of the universe, and I found it by discovering man is connected to everyone around him through embracing aloneness.

However, early on into the pandemic, suddenly realizing the length of 24 hours, I struggled to get out of bed. I had always considered resilience a prime trait of mine, but suddenly I did not know the reason for all my effort. The realization that I had been living like a ball trapped in a pinball machine caused my solar plexus to become tight. It was as if Sisyphus dropped his boulder on my chest and our shared apathy prevented either of us from removing it. Suddenly, I needed new goals and a new routine, but did not know where to begin. A space in my life needed to be filled.

Shortly after the first lockdown, a friend gave me a call. My friend had moved into a trailer behind the house of an old crazy white woman, who honestly rented it because she was also lonely. He described the place as quaint. It was on a farm filled with so many cows you had to honk your horn to get through the crowd and it rested in the middle of nature with chickens laying eggs every day. Immediately, I thought of a meditation technique called vipasanna that focuses on breathing and allows us to learn how our experiences shape our physical sensations. I asked if he would be willing to devote six hours to meditation over seven days. While hesitant, he eventually agreed.

The next day I drove about an hour to the trailer, and we filled the silence with breath and rhythmic chanting. We built an island. As the days passed by and the end approached, we knew that no one could remain on an island forever. We would be forced to take vipassana into our daily lives. As each breath flowed from our abdomen, and our awareness, impatience, and urge to live in the future came to a halt, I developed an overwhelming fear of my potential to lose this awareness.

For two hours, five times a day, in a small trailer packed with an apartment worth of items, with chickens squawking, dogs barking, and every once in while a car shooting past on the backroad, we were making the conscious choice to alleviate ourselves of the people the world assumed us to be and become ourselves. Each day was merely preparation for our introduction into the world, and within this solitude sat a growing unacceptance of time because we knew our island would be disrupted by the world's demands. Although we entered into a genuine conversation with our bodies and mind, I continued to dread the idea of returning to despair. But with

conscious precision and deliberation, I decided to have an affirmative disposition towards my loneliness. I decided to trust my aloneness and discover the energy inside of me. Surprisingly, the pandemic offered me the space to improve my relationship with myself and realize the length and brevity of time.

II. Grief

I realized the effort required to maintain peace demands our entire being to hold off the disturbances trying to come between us; peace demands internal recalibration. I continued to teach in-person yoga, but after a few weeks of consciously struggling against the ever-impending chaos, on a Tuesday morning I watched a painful, but not necessarily shocking, video. My heart collapsed as I watch a man being murdered over \$20. A little girl was losing her first love over such a small amount of money, and she would never have him back.

My father had passed away eight months earlier in September 2019, and left behind an 8-year-old daughter. Loneliness comes after everyone has gone home. After the newspaper is filled with the next death, after social media focuses on the next story, that little girl, like my sister, would still be without her father. I was unable to teach or even process my anger, for I was under the impression I grieved my father's death, but that video brought to life the fear I had for my sister growing up without a father. I cried not only for George, but also for my father and both their daughters. I allowed myself to experience the full sadness within my rage, but I told myself to continue my practice and understand grieving is a slow patient process that allows emotions to come and go as we experience them. That was vipassana at its most authentic form; taking raw emotions and not being consumed by them, but like the wind moving across the great forests, feeling them entirely while not being blown away. I allowed myself to do as Maya Angelou said, "I gave into my sadness because I had no choice." I confronted the realities of mankind and the potential to share grief through breathing, and learned we depend on each other as symbols of perseverance. However, this image is a man saying, "Yes to Life."

Looking back on my childhood, I now can see how much my parents needed the family reunions, Sunday dinners, Christmas parties, and other various gatherings. Whether consciously

or unconsciously, people need each other. We need to sit in each other's presence and enjoy the company because people are precious, and we should appreciate them while we are here.

III. Paradise

As we shared tools and practices that contributed to our personal healing, a patient, substantial becoming resonated within my spirit and recalibrated my frequency. Making sense out of nonsense became the main focus. The guilt that disguised itself as responsibility began melting away and the romantic images of a revolutionary were replaced by a desire to contribute to the tradition of love, struggle, and song. I turned deeper toward literature and mindfulness, completely consuming everything possible to enhance my growth. In the past my journals hid underneath beds, in closets, and stacked themselves disorderly on bookshelves, but the desire to turn raw emotions into a refined sensibility conquered my previous self. Communion developed a sense of inner responsibility, and all my time centered around writing and the disciplines of yoga. Every emotion became a visitor that required counseling rather than a violent intruder that needed to be vanquished.

We worked patiently to extend modern spirituality into the modern world and deepen our faith in the future of the planet by being present. We challenged assumptions, paradoxes, and worked towards enlightenment as a commitment to struggle and sacrifice. Breathing was a way to embrace our loneliness, our grief, and gain an appreciation for beauty, a way to understand that paradise is a positive affirmation toward life.

Because I wanted to become a complete human being, I learned to cry, learned to forgive, learned to accept, and learned to close my eyes. I created a new relationship with the world amidst the stages of the pandemic. I come from a people of fighters and revolutionaries, and, on this journey, I understood a spiritual community does not exist; the world is innately spiritual.

Why Do Bad Things Always Happen When It Rains?

by James H. Means, III

January 6, 2021

I dreamt for the first time in a long time: a cliff was nearer than I could have imagined, only a foot away. Behind me, land extended into the distance for what seemed like an eternity. In front of me, darkness, a darkness that could only be experienced when all things fade from existence, The Abyss. Chains hung from my body, dug into my flesh. My hands held on to them despite the pain. I began to let go of some of those heavy weights, but letting go stole my strength. I fell over the edge into the darkness that extended eternally, maybe never to return. With slow heavy breathing, I woke to the sounds of a pre-dawn rain. I spoke aloud to myself in a low voice, "Why do bad things always happen when it rains...?"

April, 2020

The world was at a standstill for many, a new challenge with Covid-19 being fresh and terrifying. For me though, the world had been frozen for a little longer still, a life in limbo, what to do with myself, every segment of life in turmoil or stuck in place. A wall made of air was also holding me back, invisible, but still thick, and with every step, crushing, the same way a child feels the first time their hand is caught in a door, throbbing, filled with worry and fear, "What just happened?"

Every step outside my door took effort and resolve. For the last seven years I, like many of you, had become more and more aware of problems in America: state brutality, police brutality, the unabashed killing of Black people in America. Americans who, measured by any realistic standard were no threat, yet were still murdered with what seemed to be limited or no consequences. At best, there was the usual dog and pony show, to 'soothe' the public's concerns. But you and I knew better. We knew these were just another set of deaths in a long tradition of America: Eric, Michael, Tamir, Walter, Alton, Philando, Briana, Mike, and eventually George. This long tradition in America: dead Black men, dead Black people in the streets.

Prior to 2020, I had been without a job or a career, aimless and lost. Having the place where I felt whole, safe, and could be myself to a degree, shut down, and something that I felt connected to and was special disappear was an earth-shaking experience. It felt as though the floor beneath me was shifting and falling away.

Things happen outside of our control though. I said my goodbyes, kept a stiff upper lip, as they say, and continued on trying to find gainful employment. A new path, but nothing was taking. A degree and twelve years of work experience seemed to mean nothing. Despair. Friends and family alike seeming to change and ask things of me that I could not give, was not willing to give. Adding to this gnawing sensation deep in my chest and my mind, was a world that seemed to ask too much. Facing these feelings deep inside was something that I didn't want to face or truly dive into, for fear of it consuming me, turning me into something I'm not: rage. Rage at a world that seemed to care and listen, hearing me clearly, hearing the things that I feared and felt, for the people that in my mind were connected to me and still under siege. This concern along with a surge in callousness, open racism, and disdain for people who stood for equality and justice, unshackled, and fully unveiled then sitting President Donald Trump.

At this point in time, it should be clear, I had a lot on my mind. It was the same for the rest of the world. Despite these thoughts, these feelings, this weight, and this pressure, I continued to be open and caring, while also trying to do what I thought was best for me. Of course, what's best for you isn't always what's best for other people and can lead to further perceived friction. Do you "cave" or "stick to your guns," - a weird expression considering what we're exploring.

April 24, 2020

Despite the pandemic and my concerns about the world at large and about police encounters, as things lightly opened back up, I said to myself, "You can't live in fear. Be brave and go out that door. Let's go for a bike ride."

In good spirits, but with a hollow burning feeling still in my chest, I crossed that threshold and travelled down the road I always use when it's time for a cycling adventure. I rounded the corner just a block away, and in the distance, I heard a sound that you only need to hear a few

times to recognize. It was a deep sound, but hollow and staccato at the same time: pop, pop, pop. I turned to look behind me, and in the distance there I could see the flashing police lights at the scene. I thought to myself, “They murdered somebody. Again.”

I continued riding and tried not to think about what might have happened. Maybe it was justified, maybe it was warranted, and it wasn't just another cop that was happy to shoot their gun off given the chance. Coming home I saw the street lined with people staring down the long road toward the area where it happened. People weren't sure what was going on, but in my mind I knew. We later learned that the man's name was Mike Ramos. And in just a few months' time, the world would learn another man's name. People have said many things about him. They have both raised him as a martyr, incorrectly, and raised him as worthy of death, cruelly. To those of us who were aware of life in America as things were, “getting back to normal,” to us at least, meant more dead Black people in the streets.

January 6, 2021

As I fell in the darkness, stripped bare, I saw a hand reaching down to grab mine. It was warm. Other hands joined in to keep me from falling further. With a moment to stop and think, I felt a small warmth spark from within, and remembered that while the world around me may have seemed bleak, there was a fire raging inside me that drove me to love life, and share warmth, acceptance, and understanding. I remembered that, despite whatever rage or anger, I was feeling toward friends, family, or the world, my love for myself and for you is greater than the darkest abyss.

This new inferno was guiding a true spirit and pure heart, filling my body, shattering the chains that were still trying to pull me deeper down. Freed from the chains I rose light, fast, and with a warm light filling my body. Still dazed, disoriented, I woke: slow heavy breathing, the sounds of a pre-dawn morning rain. I spoke aloud to myself in a low voice, “Why do bad things always happen when it rains?” I told myself, “It's okay. You're just having a rough go. You'll be fine.” It turned out, the world would seem shattered for many that day

Love Thy Neighbor

by Debra Diann Harman Miller

My next-door neighbor of four years had been traumatized by the loss of a relationship and their shared home before she moved into our assisted living apartments. She was forced to move into a neighborhood that was so dangerous that she feared for her life. Her purse and her keys were stolen out of her apartment over and over. There was a constant crowd inside her apartment at all hours who threatened her and poisoned her food. She was afraid. She was forced to hide all her jewelry and keepsakes in her car. The crowds would not let her sleep so she began driving around all night until she could finally rest in her car in the grocery store parking lot until daylight. She could not even come home to sleep or to shower. Even when she locked the door, they would break into her apartment at all hours of the night as they had stolen several sets of keys and her wallet over and over.

We talked about how to make them leave, but she is an adult, and she is the only one who can tell them to leave. Because they had poisoned all of her food, she lost over 50 pounds during the fall of 2021. The only way I could see if she was still alive was to take her a breakfast snack every morning before the intruders awoke. Most days she could answer. She tried to appease the visitors with drinks and plates of food, but they criticized her cooking and she quit eating entirely. She had worked in a school cafeteria all her life, so this criticism was really hurtful. My neighbor could tell the intruders needed mental health help and she began to share her psychiatric medications with them. But they merely hid them around her apartment so she could not take her own medicine, either. They gaslit her and would not let her leave or call out to her family. She had physical altercations with them to the point that she was forced to duct tape her apartment door shut so the noises would not disturb other residents and violate the terms of her rental agreement.

Then there was another round of breast cancer and chemotherapy. I could not believe the cruel and selfish ways these people I had never seen before the pandemic would demonize her. Why could they not just leave her alone? Wasn't she suffering enough? EMS came for her chest pains. Then, finally, the intruder that was the ringleader went too far pushing her around. My

neighbor found the courage to advocate for herself. I was so happy to hear she had banished that witch of a friend for five days so she could get the rest her doctor ordered. She had cancer surgery and chemotherapy, but when she recovered, she found that the intruders had stolen all her money and all her meds. Then, her boyfriend and best friend for decades moved out of their shared townhouse and there was no safe, familiar place left for her anywhere.

Although an ambulance was called several times when the chest pains made her fear for her life, she was afraid to abandon all her belongings. I became terribly concerned for her safety when I took my dog out in the middle of the night and saw her dressed in torn up jeans and a leather coat instead of the beautiful dresses she had always worn before. She was looking all around for a safe way to pass by all the evil strangers in the lobby. In her left hand was a claw hammer. In her right, a machete. As she raced to her car, it occurred to me that she could be mistaken for an attacker with her weapons. I intercepted her as she was heading out to her car and told her it made my service dog uncomfortable for her to wave them around so wildly. I asked her to come back inside, and we turned off the lights so the strangers could not see us. I got her a drink of water and excused myself. I slipped away to the hallway, called the apartment manager secretly, explained what was going on, and asked her to call for help. In minutes, what looked like a SWAT team filled the hall in front of her apartment. There was a loud knock and two police officers entered. Only they were not asking for a description of her attackers, what type of vehicle they drove, or where she had met them. Not even a list of the stolen property. One officer in SWAT gear stood blocking the door, the other came in and asked if he could sit down. He moved the chair directly in front of my neighbor and sat faced her straight on. He locked his eyes with hers. The seriousness and direct eye contact had caused her to realize that the police were questioning her. She was scared and confused about why the police were there, but she was willing to listen. I sat beside her as the officer asked how she was sleeping. He shared that sometimes even policemen go without sleep for so long and get so tired that they hallucinate too. She was responding to his questions. He handed her his card and explained that it was a direct line to him, a Mental Health Deputy, and that if she was scared or had trouble again, he would answer the phone and come to help her.

You see, all of her demons lived inside her mind. We talked every day, and I supported her by respecting that what others might view as imaginary is real for her. Some days she would invite me into her apartment, other times my apartment was her temporary refuge from the strangers. I hooked up my computer and invited her over to attend some virtual mental health support groups at Austin Mental Health Community such as the seated Tai Chi classes. She came over for a few virtual church services. She was willing to participate as long as no one knew she was there, and I kept her off-camera.

The stress she felt created real threats to her physical health. The fear of electric shock therapy, institutionalization, losing her car and apartment kept her from accepting inpatient treatment that was prescribed by her psychiatrist for another year. The inpatient stay helped her greatly as finally there was someone to observe her around the clock and see the torture she faced every day. They gave her information and resources and she moved on to outpatient treatment for another two weeks. She still could not sleep in her apartment and spent a few hours a day moving things around, packing and unpacking. By summer, it was time for the third breast cancer surgery, and it was clear to me that the intruders had returned to her apartment.

We talked about our histories with mental health. She shared that hers began at the end of an abusive marriage. The screaming she heard was so loud, and she could not get to safety. She shared that she had woken up in the hospital with both ears bandaged and in extreme pain. The night before, she had attempted to stop the screaming noise by slamming an ice pick through her right ear drum. Blood was everywhere, but the noise persisted, so she stabbed her other ear.

We live in an assisted living apartment complex with 22 units. Many of the residents are so immune compromised from chemotherapy and respiratory issues that they were advised not to take any vaccine. Some were told not to even open their mail for three days after it arrived. The isolation was especially difficult for neighbors who lost their phone or phone service and could not receive a call from anyone. And then, the building manager was offered a job elsewhere and left after having been at the complex for a decade. Three years after the pandemic began, there are still those who have never been able to leave their apartment. As a person who has

lived experience with mental health challenges, I recognized neighbors' symptoms and found ways to be helpful. I found applications for government and community services related to COVID and went to the neighborhood store in my wheelchair to fetch meds, supplies, or food. Although I was of service to many, I am sharing the story of just one of the people I have been helping through mental health peer specialist services. It is my hope that mental health peer specialists' services and support will be available to others who, like my neighbors, were further victimized by the forced lockdown.

Untitled

by Donna Mohlman

As a dyslexic specialist and librarian for almost 40 years, I know how to find information and navigate systems: public health, education, government, social services, healthcare, research, philanthropy, etc. At the turn of the 21st century, I have concluded that if we as a nation could garner all resources - time, talent, treasure - towards alleviating or eradicating symptoms manifested by disease rather than spending so much time and energy worrying about labels and diagnoses, our citizens would suffer less. The suffering individual couldn't care less if the label is dementia, Alzheimer's, Parkinson's, bipolar, schizophrenia, diabetes, autism, multiple sclerosis, anxiety, depression, etc. which all have similar symptoms such as: anxiety, tremors, short-term memory loss, confusion, hallucinations, depression, expressive aphasia, mobility issues, trouble swallowing, and.

As I begin a third decade caring for family members with brain disorders, I have experienced firsthand the insanity of the United States healthcare system - a system that leaves the sickest and most vulnerable citizens, oftentimes people of color, at the mercy of the wealthy and privileged members of the dominant culture. While this system has been broken for decades, it was exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Our citizens are dying while waiting for help. In the last 20 years that I have been directly involved in the mental health care system in Harris County, I have learned much about what is successful and what works to support people suffering from serious mental illnesses. Stable, affordable, safe housing is essential. We have found that it works for our family. The advantages that my son, Nick, has over most people who suffer with serious mental illnesses are primarily that, up until recently, he had four highly educated and successful parents directly involved in his care and dedicated to improving his quality of life. We have provided resources such as private health insurance, financial resources, vehicle care, and maintenance. In addition, his father's courage in seeking a mental health warrant enabled us to have Nick in our lives these past 15 years.

Due to his 10-year relationship with his psychiatrist, Dr. CL, Nick was able to successfully manage his life until the COVID-19 crisis hit us all. For more than 12 years, he had stable, safe,

and affordable housing through the Section 8 federal housing program in a small community of fewer than 20 units. When the mental health authority got out of the housing business and Nick was no longer able to live in that housing community, his quality of life deteriorated. After the sudden loss of his father in September 2020, who he was remarkably close to, Nick decompensated to dangerous levels resulting in three emergency hospitalizations between January and August 2021. His discharge from the hospital without any input from his family or the psychiatrist who initiated the welfare check was not only unconscionable but certainly against the standards of care set by the Joint Commission on hospital administration.

I received a phone call from the discharge nurse at 5:15 pm on August 18, notifying me that Nick would be discharged the next day. I told the nurse I was having surgery at 7:30 am that morning and would be unable to pick him up. She told me they would put him in a cab or bus to take him home. I pleaded with her not to do that and told her I would call his stepmother (a recent widow and cancer patient) to see if she could pick him up.

After my surgery, the nurse spoke to my husband, Nick's stepfather of 32 years, telling him that the hospital doctor had already signed the discharge order. Nick would have prescriptions to fill upon discharge and a follow-up appointment with Dr. CL. She said that most patients stay five to seven days and Nick's discharge was ordered because he no longer met acute criteria.

On Monday, Dr. CL called and asked me to check on Nick because the hospital had not sent medical records to him, and he was unable to reach Nick by phone. He also told me that the Neuro Psychiatric Center called him regarding Nick's medications and this information was sent to the hospital upon admission.

Less than 12 hours after discharge, Nick lost his wallet. Less than one week after discharge, he lost his three-week-old iPhone, and later that week he was missing for four days. When my husband and I finally found him, he was more psychotic, manic, and paranoid than prior to the first welfare check. After I spoke with a member of the Mobile Crisis Outreach Team at The Harris Center for Mental Health on September 2, I followed her suggestion and filed a mental health warrant. Harris County deputies returned Nick to the same hospital at 5 pm on September 3. I hand-delivered the testimony I gave in support of the warrant as well as

photographs of the condition of his apartment to the hospital administrator. Nick spent another ten days in the hospital.

It required tenacity, hard work, and determination to obtain renewed benefits from Texas Health and Human Services (HHSC) for Nick that had been denied when he was hospitalized during the renewal period. It required ten months and the efforts of three people, a 41-year-old HHSC client and his two college-educated parents, to finally succeed. We felt compelled to call attention to our experience because we suspect many adult HHSC clients lack the kind of support our son has.

Many clients who depend on HHSC lack the wherewithal to negotiate the obstacles, challenges, and hurdles that took us ten months (January-October 2021) to overcome. In many cases, people who possess the skills to effectively manage the renewal process could function well enough to become wage earners and not require Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI) or Supplemental Nutrition Programs (SNAP).

There MUST be a way for the system to work better, but that improvement cannot take place unless and until people at the highest levels of authority, management, and leadership become aware of and feel compelled to give attention to these circumstances. We were given cause to wonder: if our son did not have the benefit of our support and resources this year, if the SNAP benefit that was inaccessible from February through late October had been his only source of food, how would he have eaten during that time? We wondered how many clients experience acute food insecurity because they are unsuccessful at appeals and feel defeated, as our son did, by the mental health care system.

We appealed our repeated denials for the sake of people with mental health challenges who lack the resources our son has. There must be a better way. We share our experience in the hope that our leadership will learn from our experience and act constructively to make improvements.

Lessons learned: 1) Become a detective. Write everything down with specific details of who, what, when, where, why, and how. You will need this information later. Again, and again. 2) Speak for those who cannot speak for themselves. Even when your voice is shaky with fear,

anger, or uncertainty your loved one's life depends on you. 3) Find reasons to laugh. Tell stories and share old memories often because through the retelling, new memories are made. 4) Set down the load. Find ways to recharge your batteries and spirit. You cannot drink from an empty cup. Remember, your loved one never gets a break from their brain. Be kind. 5) Work for the "WIN": What's Important Next? If you are unable to determine the WIN, find Who's Important Now. And the only question relevant to determine care is "How is my loved one doing today?" Meet them where they are. Members of our society whose brains are wired differently are at a disadvantage due to the amount of bureaucratic literacy required to obtain mental health support services. They often require an advocate to act on their behalf. Next time you encounter someone who has this differently wired brain, ask "What happened to you?" rather than "What's wrong with you?" All behavior makes sense in context.

Every crash leaves shattered pieces and not all can be found and put back together. Every hospitalization is traumatic. After six hospitalizations in 18 months, my son is still working to find lost pieces. After the last discharge from a behavioral health hospital, I noticed an elderly woman slowly shuffling from the discharge wheelchair to an outdoor bench. She waited for transportation in 100-degree heat for more than two hours. She could have been my mother, mother-in-law, daughter, neighbor, coworker.

President George W. Bush declared the 2000s to be The Decade of the Brain. While progress has been made, COVID-19 has put a spotlight on inequities and unjust policies and practices that remain in the United States. We have much work to do.

Words matter. Stories matter. Labels don't.

Deliverance to the Promised Land

by Nicole Escalante Mosqueda

The other night I had a nightmare that we were being persecuted for our mixed-race relationship. We had to hide it, then live separately. Finally, we were forced to live underground for fear of assassination. This nightmare resulted from my post-traumatic stress disorder and the stress I experienced from our specific story in this specific time of racial conflict. We are star crossed lovers. During this time of heightened injustice, race-related trauma, and the pandemic, my mental health has been impacted from facing the deportation of my husband, having a baby, and being unemployed.

My mental health has been impacted due to racial injustice while my husband immigrates to America. Our relationship prevails in the face of intense hate for immigrants in America, especially along the Texas/Mexico border. In America's history, everyone is an immigrant. Yet, it is now nearly impossible to immigrate legally. My husband came to the U.S. to have a chance at living the American dream. His home country offered no promise of a life of anything beyond destitution. America is definitely his home. He has built himself up through charisma, a great work ethic, and has been successful in the fields of healthcare and real estate.

He first met me at my workplace while he was volunteering. At that time, he had lost everything and had no job because of having lost his legal residency status. I helped him get a job. Even though he was still underemployed, he was humble and grateful to be working and earning. Later, we became best friends as he helped me leave an abusive relationship. Then I fell in love with him, and we married. My family did not want this for me. They tried to talk me out of marrying an underemployed immigrant. But I knew his greatness. I knew that he would rise up to achieve the things God made him for. I knew that he loved me and took care of me. I knew that he had a servant's heart, doing so many acts of love and service for me. I knew that he built me up, supported me emotionally, and challenged me to be my best in so many ways. I petitioned for his residency while he faced deportation. I did not want to lose my true love; to live without him.

Thoughts of losing him to deportation and of him wasting away in his home country were incredibly distressing. Work kept me going. Living with my husband, loving him, supporting him emotionally, living every moment together to the fullest... these things kept me going. My faith and radical trust in God helped me be at peace during this turmoil. When I had my baby, he saved him. Although United States Citizenship and Immigrations Services had unjustly doubted my husband, he proved the validity and the truth of our love. They granted our petition. We are now applying for residency.

My relationship with my husband has brought more life and wholeness than I could ever have imagined for myself as a person with a mental health diagnosis. It challenges me to be my best. He is a wonderful support system and allows me to be myself and be loved despite and because of all my flaws and virtues. The true love with which we made a covenant with God unites me to my Lord in so many ways. I am so blessed to have this relationship in my life. The love and bliss provide so much balm for the suffering from my mental illness. We are praying for deliverance to the promised land where we can be a holy family as citizens.

I experienced hardships during the pandemic. I had a baby. I am a Hispanic woman and have always been proud of my ethnicity, and in a society that sees Hispanic women as sexual objects, I was proud to not be a statistic. I had never had a child before. Whenever I was asked the inevitable question, "How many kids do you have?" I was always proud to say, "None! I have never been married." Not only was I highlighting the fact that I was not a stereotype of a Hispanic woman with many kids, but also that I did not have kids outside of marriage.

'Blessed are the barren': I had given in to this lie. I had also believed my family's lie that I would never be able to care for a child because of my bipolar disorder. I thought I would never have children. It took healing from this fear of inadequacy, a conversion to being open to life and bearing children, and my husband's and my God's call, belief, and trust in me for me to pray to have a child. After I got pregnant, my husband got a great new job in healthcare in a hospital emergency room.

Two months later the pandemic hit. In a way it was a blessing that he had work as many did not, but it was also very scary that he worked on the front lines risking his and his family's lives

to make a living and support us (I resigned due to the pandemic). In addition, I could not see my family—my other support system—because they did not want to be exposed to Covid. I became depressed. I was so isolated. I had nothing to do and no one to be with besides my husband who spent a lot of time at work. Blessedly, my mother put fear aside and came to take care of me and baby for over a month after I gave birth, a Hispanic tradition.

But after she left, I experienced postpartum depression so badly that I had visions of hurting my baby, my beloved son. It was so scary. I wasn't even sure if I could trust myself. But my family and doctors trusted me. Thank God. I got better slowly. Gradually my family came to see us. I started volunteering virtually at my former place of work.

My baby Emmanuel is a miraculous blessing and a wonderful challenge. I am so grateful to be a mother. I never imagined this. Living totally for him and his needs is a total gift of myself for him. For me—a selfish person who has always lived for my own feelings and desires—sacrificing my job, wants, comfort, and so much more to meet his needs is so selfless and so good for me. This makes me feel holy and close to my son and my Lord. My life is so full, and I am so happy because of my baby. He has given me life as I have given it to him through Jesus. I am totally dedicated, more than I have ever been in my life. I was born for this. I pray to be a good wife and mother like Mama Mary, Jesus' mother.

The final way my mental illness was affected due to the pandemic was becoming unemployed. I had been working at a clubhouse that served people suffering with mental health issues and assisted them in reaching recovery through work and relationships. It was my dream job - a Catholic nonprofit in the mental health field. It was my life for over nine years. I resigned because it was not safe for my baby to be exposed to the Covid virus through my beloved clubhouse members, many of whom were unfortunately homeless and had other risk factors. I have worked since the age of 18. I went from being super social—with so many people to love and serve and have relationships with, to having only my husband who was often absent from my side because he was working. Losing the clubhouse was a blow to the heart. Now I volunteer for my beloved clubhouse virtually. I assist by counseling them with problems, helping them make their own decisions, helping them gain employment (and all that that

entails), connecting them with resources, and so much more. Maintaining these relationships and supporting my beloved members is my favorite part. Work has done a great deal to bring me back to myself. Work is a way I survive my mental illness. It is so therapeutic on so many levels. It forces me to put aside my problems and serve those in need, to focus on the need and task at hand. It challenges me to be my best. It is so affirming to see my work help others reach recovery in their mental health. My clubhouse has saved me in so many ways.

In conclusion, during this time of heightened injustice, race related trauma and the pandemic, my mental health has been impacted in that I have faced the deportation of my husband, had a baby, and become unemployed. I have found that what has brought me resilience and recovery in the pandemic and at other times has been practicing my faith; maintaining my relationships with my husband, son, and family; and working to serve others in need, especially those with mental health challenges.

The Face of Fear

by Janet Paleo

I have been here before. I didn't think I would ever be back here again and yet here I am. Afraid to leave my house. Afraid to die. Afraid, scared, lonely, and angry. Oh, so angry. The first time I felt this way I was hiding from the world because I feared being put in a psychiatric ward again. This time I was hiding from a nasty bug called COVID.

My best friend died at the beginning of the invasion of the bug. His symptoms mirrored what I would later learn were Covid symptoms but that is not what is written on his death certificate. And because of the fear, there was no memorial, no service, no way to say goodbye to the only person who stood by me through all those hospitalizations. The only one who visited me is gone. The only one who did not treat me as deranged, is gone. Neither my parents nor my sisters ever called or visited all those months I was in the hospital. It was as if being in the hospital became the family's dirty little secret. People who said they were my friends disappeared. For most, I ceased to exist. Only he came and now he is gone.

People never understood our bond. We met when I was just 16 and he was 25, a veteran returning home from his tour in Vietnam. I was hurting from early childhood abuse, and he was hurting as well. He liked guys and I liked girls. In a world where we seemed like we didn't fit, we fit together as friends. We became closer than family. We loved each other, not in a romantic way but even closer than those in love. Perhaps because our families were not accepting of us as we were, we created a sense of a unique family whose bond was stronger than blood.

Together we muddled through life to find a path forward. I am convinced that all the things we call mental illness are no more than reactions to fear. He supported me in so many ways but most of all, I felt safe knowing he was part of my life. He was my friend. Now he is gone.

So many people have died or become extremely sick from this bug. We seem to find a way to combat the bug but, as in so many horror movies, the monster changes to become more contagious, more deadly, more determined to wipe the entire population off the planet, starting with my friend. So, I hide.

Because of my psychiatric history I have long been aware of the research showing that people who have been in the public system die about 25 years earlier than other people. In Texas it is 29 years earlier. I fear the statistics may be about me. When I visit the parents of my friends, I swap stories with them about pacemakers, my cataract surgeries, and other old age complaints that others my age are not dealing with yet. And because of this I know the bug has a target on me. I know if it finds me, I too will likely leave this world like my friend. I also know that because of all I have been through, I now can make a difference for other people like my friend did for me. So, I hide, hoping the bug won't find me while I reach out and work to help others face their fears. And I am reminded of the first time I hid away from the world: I hid so people could not see how much hurt and fear I carried inside. I found my way out of hiding only to now find myself back in. But now without my friend.

I have learned some things since my first days of hiding out. I have become convinced that all those things we call mental illness are no more than reactions to fear. Anyone who has been in a serious car accident will say they avoid any circumstances that remind them of the accident as much as possible. Fear of the trauma happening again causes a shift in how we react to life. When we become afraid, especially if what made us afraid was intense or long lasting, our minds react to protect us, to keep us safe. For some of us that means we experience alternate realities. For others of us it means sleeping all the time or not getting involved with life. Still others try to speed through life without being present or take substances to forget the fear and the hurt, at least for a while.

I continue to help others, but my grief lingers. My heart is broken, and I miss my friend so much. So many people are experiencing loss. The loss of friends, loss of loved ones, loss of control to something they can't see. The grief and the fear are overwhelming, and some people lash out in defiance and anger as we are held hostage by this bug whose invasion has caused us to live life differently. It has been an advancing force causing us to fear a loved one's hug, to fear venturing beyond one's own little space.

Yes, I have been here before but then I had my friend. Now my friend is gone. He left me alone and I didn't even get to say goodbye. I join the rest of the world in acknowledging the

powerlessness we feel in our lives on a daily basis. People react as they have always reacted in the face of fear. Some try to gain control by becoming bullies. Others try to gain control by not caring about anything because they are too afraid. We are at the mercy of an unseen cruel virus and yet I must believe we shall survive. Maybe not all of us, like my friend, but enough of us so that we can find a way through the fear to find a life worth living. I must believe this. This is what my friend would want me to focus on. If we can retain our humanity in the face of the attacks, maybe we can evolve into a more accepting world – a world where people are kept safe, feel safe, and no longer live in constant fear. This could be the beginning of a world without the term mental illness. I am sure of it. A world where friends lift each other from their pain and make the world a better place. I know my world was made better by my friend. Although he is gone, I learned about the importance of friends. I miss my friend, for he is gone. He was my friend.

Misogyny Misnomers My Melanated Mental Health

by Nakia Hillary Sims

If another white social worker or BIPOC employment specialist who has benefited financially from their network gives me career advice that they never had to follow themselves, I will scream. Juris Doctorate, Bachelor of Science, Cum Laude honors, teacher certification, expired real estate license, Turner Construction Project Management, blah blah blah. America was not a meritocracy before the Covid-19 pandemic or after George Floyd's murder.

This is the first time I have wanted to write publicly about my mental health recovery during the pandemic. I considered that the title of my essay might be too strong or too much. The combination of my borderline personality disorder, depression, anxiety, and 'imposter syndrome' has always made me shrink and think that I'm too much. I'm not sure how many people will read this, judge me, hate me. This constant fear that everyone will hate me has also stopped me from reaching the proverbial 'finish lines' in life.

Written expression and journaling are part of my self-love. Thanks for joining me on my journey to uncover and rediscover new ways to love myself while also being forced to see gray in a world that has changed but not enough for those of us that only think in black and white.

Another title I considered for my essay was, "Outside the Quadrilateral Parallelogram." The four sides of the quadrilateral that I'll explore here represent the four areas of my life that have most impacted my mental health recovery the during the pandemic: health equity (food equity, access to therapy, and employment accommodations), housing, self-employment, and family.

Along with other Black women who have visible and non-visible disabilities, I was simultaneously fighting food insecurity and food stamp denials during the pandemic. Because all students in the Houston Independent School District automatically qualify for free lunch, I saw social media postings from white 'stay-at-home' moms and six figure salary earners describing how easy it was for them to get [Pandemic Electronic Benefits Transfers](#) from the federal Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program. I couldn't help but juxtapose their experiences to my own as a Black person having to send 20 emails to appeal the program's denial of benefits to me. If I had to guess who faced food insecurity and received

unemployment denials and overpayment letters during the pandemic, I think it would likely be BIPOC families.

During the pandemic I also started meeting with the [Vital Village Team](#) in Boston as a Food System Fellow. This position allowed me to help improve the capacity of communities to optimize child well-being, prevent early life adversity, and advance food equity through coalition building, leadership development, participatory research, data-sharing, and advocacy. Most importantly, the leadership at Vital Village showed me much grace and kindness. I'm often disappointed that my self-care and therapy don't produce the immediate mood control that I'd like. But having people show me grace not only encourages me, it also motivates me to continue improving my collaborative skills as I continue my mental health recovery journey. The food we eat has such a huge impact on how we feel, so in the summer of 2021, I connected with the [National Public Housing Museum \(NPHM\)](#) and collaborated with [Taylor Street Farms \(TSF\)](#) in Chicago to help low-income entrepreneurs gain the tools they need to grow their businesses. At TSF we worked on growing garlic. My spirit, mind, and body were nourished by talking to public housing residents about their right to grow gardens and demonstrating the simplicity of creating fermented honey garlic. I worked with the NPHM team, entrepreneurs, and current and former public housing residents to start an online store, [Corner Store Co-op](#). I also battled to maintain my housing during the pandemic. After a housefire in 2016, my daughters and I had become homeless and lived in a homeless shelter for six months. I had been on a public housing waitlist for five years. Fast forward to the pandemic, my housing had mold and an inoperable toilet after Winter Storm Uri. I became like a machine. I had to ignore these glaring issues. My daughters and I lived like we were outside using bags and eventually a camper toilet. My stress and anxiety were exacerbated as I repeatedly asked for help. Although I have advocated for others, the saying "He who represents himself has a fool for a client" comes to mind. If I were speaking to another tenant, I would have shared information about a plethora of tenant's rights organizations and numerous legal advocacy groups that support the right to counsel.

After attending Zoom meetings and receiving email blasts from a network of over 600 legal advocates, attorneys, and paralegals, the wage and opportunity gap slapped me in the face like a night at the Oscars. I had facilitated a workshop on targeted universalism, equity, and parity, explaining housing issues to a white adjacent paralegal, but despite my lived expertise, law degree, and paralegal certificate, I couldn't get a paid position. So, I took the many rejections, ignored resumes, and uncomfortable interviews with tatted less educated white males, cried a lot, ate a lot of chocolate, and gained over 30 pounds during the pandemic.

I also knew of an organization that hired and supported white LGBTQIA advocates with little to no experience. And while this organization served a homeless population that is over 50 percent Black, it did not have a single Black staff member on the leadership team. Austin, we have a problem! Over 95 percent of the salaried advocates attending these Zoom meetings from all across the U.S. were white, a stark contrast to the disproportionate number of BIPOC clients who were facing evictions, housing instability, and/or homelessness.

The mental toll and the level of trauma experienced by Black women and our children is something I know all too well. There's a wealth of data about the higher rates of evictions experienced by Black women and the gender pay gap. If you have time, I recommend reading a few books that we housing advocates reference, including "The Color of Law" by Richard Rothstein and "Evicted" by Matthew Desmond. I also recommend watching Mia Birdsong's TedTalk, "The Story We Tell About Poverty Isn't True."

I have always loved exercising; it gives me those amazing endorphins that I crave. I am working on not punishing myself with permission to exercise after I have finished my long list of things to accomplish. I have learned that my self-care includes taking long baths, exercising, time with my therapist and psychiatrist, writing poetry, and celebrating my successes.

In addition to experiencing a lack of exercise, my faith as a divorced Christian has led me to live a life of abstinence until marriage. So, in addition to being an extrovert without people during the pandemic, I had lived as a single mom without companionship for five years before the pandemic. If I didn't call my mom, my phone would not ring. I decided to date a year and half after the pandemic started - having a total of two kisses in three years has also been part of my

Black Christian single mom journey. It is not only the road less traveled, but a road full of detours and potholes!

How can I not feel depressed or stressed as a Black woman during a worldwide pandemic?

Although we Black women have some of the highest rates of college matriculation, we have salaries comparable to white males without a high school diploma. How can I not be depressed? I know my value and worth but live in a country, even a diverse city, where I'm not seen, heard, or compensated equitably.

As I sit as a volunteer in trainings led by white females working for nonprofits supported by Covid-19 funds, I want to scream. It is easier for these white social workers and advocates to speak for us melanated women under the mistaken beliefs that we are uneducated while they have "earned" their positions. These misnomers once fed my morbidly obese imposter syndrome, as did the misogyny found at the worktables and in the courtrooms where mediocre white males with less life experience and/or education were not only invited to participate but presumed to be the experts.

I'm not unapologetically Black. So, I must acknowledge the white and BIPOC folks that have encouraged me, or shared job leads during the pandemic. Someone out there isn't taking a paid opportunity but advocating for pay equity, health equity, and justice and it's not just us Black women. Even with a Black female psychiatrist, psychologist, and daily Wellbutrin, I scream internally. You're still reading? Make time for self-care because you are worth it. There isn't a vaccination for misogyny, racism, or the stigma of mental illness. I am a Black woman and my melanated mental illness remains. It is an old variant that when left untreated has led to the death of unrecorded dreams.

I Just Need to Breathe

by Kianna Wright

It was seven a.m., and I had just received a call that my closest friend had been rushed to the hospital due to Covid-19. My world started to close in. I couldn't breathe. The safe and innocent society surrounding me began to plummet. I had thought losing my job was harsh enough, but I now felt as if the world was closing in on me. Breathe, Kianna, I told myself. That began my daily mantra.

It was as if the system I lived in targeted me and everyone attached to me. The day before, I had been notified that I could no longer return to my job at the jewelry store I loved. Not only was I struggling financially, but now my friend, my sister, was unconscious in a hospital. Her mother had just passed, and I was considered the last of her family. The day couldn't get any worse. That gut-wrenching feeling that happens every time you ride a roller-coaster, as it peaks just before it drops - that is how I felt every day during the pandemic. The recovery from such hardships has been a journey.

So how did I do it? I had to learn to breathe because my life depended on it. I wrote down my goals daily. I found ways to meditate and get out of the house to get fresh air. The pandemic forced me to find ways for my mind to relax. I had to accept that the world will continuously move around me, and what it brings may reflect positive or negative energy. This is how I dealt with every difficult situation that built character. Thus, learning the breathing technique.

Every breakdown, every shattering moment, required me to take a step back and breathe. This method has helped me and gave me insight as I watched more African Americans publicly murdered, many people dying from Covid-19, and people losing their ability to stay financially afloat. All of these traumatic pandemic experiences have affected me and continue to have lasting effects. But maintaining a breathing technique has helped me take a step back for just a moment to gather myself before tackling any obstacle that comes my way.