

# **TO MY BELOVEDS:**

Letters on Faith, Race, Loss, and Radical Hope

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## Salutation

Dear Beloved-to-Be,

I was seven or eight years old when Sister Catherine Weldon pulled me aside one Sunday after church and said, “Baby, you gonna preach someday.”

I do not remember the context for her declaration, but I’m sure it was partly inspired by our pastor, Reverend Pendelton, who was a youth ministry genius. Where some saw Black children as a problem that needed to be solved, he saw us as leaders with unique insights into the nature of God. He empowered us to use our voices and trained us early on the nuisances of leading worship services.

Maybe I’d prayed that day or read scripture. Perhaps I’d led the congregation in our weekly recitation of the Ten Commandments or the Apostles’ Creed. It could have been the womanish way I directed the younger kids in the choir to stand up straight in their green and white robes as we sang the A&B selections that morning. Whatever it was that I’d done caused Sister Weldon’s spiritual third eye to open and give witness to something in me that I did not see in myself.

That is one of the great gifts of community—the recognition that we do not emerge from our mother’s womb fully formed, but rather are shaped by the ordinary encounters we have with the people whom we call *beloved*.

The term *beloved* appears 130 times in the *New Revised Standard Version* of the sacred text of my faith tradition—the Holy Bible. It is used as a salutation (the Pauline epistles), a demarcation of divine favor (Matthew 12:18), and a pet name between lovers (Song of Songs). In my life interactions, I use it in reference to those I have been called into sacred relationships: family, friends, lovers, ancestors, and those yet to be born. Some of them I have known intimately, while others exist only on the periphery of my dreams.

All are my teachers. Teachers like Sister Weldon.

I wish I could say that her words stuck with me that day. I'm sure I just smiled and nodded politely before chasing my friends Caronda and Vanessa down the back staircase of the sanctuary to play in the churchyard. My mama, who overheard the conversation, reminded me of Sister Weldon's prophecy in the days leading up to my ordination in the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church. As she helped me slip into my black preaching robe for the first time, she smiled and shared a message from Sister Weldon: "I told you so."

Seven years later, on February 2, 2021, Sister Weldon became an ancestor at the age of 92. Her obituary describes her as one who loved the earth, someone whose love of the land was evident in the time she spent fishing with her husband, taking her grandchildren camping, or working in her flower and vegetable gardens. Toward the end is a snapshot of the woman I knew—a lifelong member of the AME Church, a high soprano in the choir, a faithful member of the Women's Missionary Society, and an expert baker who loved bringing freshly made desserts on Sunday mornings. To that list I would add *seer*, *discerner of spirits*, and *wisdom keeper*.

Losing her during a global pandemic meant that I was not able to honor her life and legacy in person. Yet when I allow my

memory to guide me on a journey into the past, tears of mourning give way to sweet release. I am a part of a spiritual tradition wherein death is not the counterpoint to life. It is an unfolding process that contextualizes, catalyzes, and confirms our relationship to time.

Time is the one resource we all share, though each of us never knows at a given moment how much of it we have left. Lately, I have been fantasizing about what it would be like to live a long life. That is why when people ask me what I want to be when I grow up, I say an old Black woman. I want to be the church mother, like Sister Weldon, wearing a big hat and seated at her designated pew every Sunday. I strive to be the lady who always has a ready supply of hard candies at the bottom of her purse and is equally equipped with a word of encouragement or correction for the young people who run past her in the sanctuary.

I want to be like the Black women at Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church who helped raise me. They were Proverbs 18:21<sup>1</sup> women who knew that, for Black children, the power of life and death reside in the tongue. Each week they spoke life into me over Sunday school lessons and youth group expeditions. They whispered words of affirmation as my friends and I snuck into the church kitchen for an extra sweet roll or slice of pound cake after services.

Their lives were testimonies of survival in a world that refused to see the fullness of their humanity. These church women knew their God to be *real* even when their understanding of the Divine did not fit neatly within church doctrine. Exquisitely imperfect vessels, they were healers and heretics, master theologians and misfits who conjured the Spirit often and by many names—*Way-maker*, *Deliverer*, *Shelter in a Time of Storm*, and *A Present Help*

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<sup>1</sup> Proverbs 18:21 reads “Death and life are in the power of the tongue, and those who love it will eat its fruits.” (New Revised Standard Version).

*in a Time of Trouble.* Their God was one who, in the words of a gospel song from my youth, was “always on time,” meaning no matter what we may see with our human eyes, the Spirit of the living God is always present and toiling on behalf of those in the margins.

They were not perfect. At times their own unaddressed trauma and complicity to the status quo led to opinions that were both loud *and* wrong. I did not, for example, learn about the hypersexualization of Black women’s bodies from rap music videos as many throughout my childhood falsely asserted. I learned about it at the church. I remember as a young girl attending youth ministry conventions where older men with wandering hands insisted upon unsolicited hugs that lingered a little too long and comments offered a little too often regarding my blossoming figure. After one particularly unnerving episode with an older man at a church convention, I shared what happened with a church mother that I trusted. She proceeded to check the length of my hem, comment on the tightness of my blouse, and insist upon my wearing a lap cloth (a long piece of fabric made of satin and lace worn over a skirt) for the remainder of the service—lest I unwittingly lead one of the men into a state of temptation.

Even their imperfections were a gift that warned against the danger of placing a person on too high a pedestal. People, they taught me, will disappoint you. Even God sometimes may disappoint you. I learned that it’s one thing to honor the achievements of a person, it’s quite another to take stock of their values by carefully observing how they live. A famous preacher, they admonished, may speak a compelling word that leads a listener to Christ, but a community committed to walking with that believer through the best and worst of times will keep that person in the faith.

Indeed, the church women of my childhood did wait for a savior or celebrity to come and fix their troubles. Their callused hands were both witness and warning. The hardened flesh of their palms told stories of labor seen and unseen. Their fingers worked miracles, turning simple ingredients into feasts that fed multitudes and fashioned hair some labeled “unruly” into intricate braided patterns that made us feel like African queens and kings. Guided by mother wit and determination, they created new family structures and reared children who were not theirs by blood.

These are the women who taught me grit. They also showed me that ingenuity, creativity, and play are always within our grasp. A blank piece of paper and set of crayons can be the gateway to a new world. A cardboard box can be transformed into a car, a house, and a spaceship, sometimes within the span of minutes. “Outside” can be a pulpit, a racetrack, a zoo, a safari, and a laboratory. And God, they shared, is present in all of it.

Annicc Mallory	Loretta Jackson
Catherine Sanders	Louise Watson
Connie Fonza	Marla Ferguson
Ella Oliver	Onelle Crider
Evelyn Manley	Royce Warren
Gertrude Mallory	Shirley Palmer
Jacqueline Watson	Sonya Mallory
Johnetta Green	Venita Bowie
Karlean Lamotte	

I speak your names.

## Radical Hope as Roadmap

The church women of my childhood were progenitors of a lineage of social healing grounded in *radical hope*. For them, hope was and is not the same thing as optimism. It is not a feeling nor a desired future state that is the substance of our longings. Hope is the everyday practice of believing that the material conditions of the world can be better and that we have the capacity to bring about that change in the here and now.

This vision of hope is best captured in the words of organizer, educator, and curator Mariame Kaba. A longtime prison abolitionist, her work focuses on ending violence, dismantling the prison industrial complex, transformative justice, and supporting youth leadership development. In her book, *We Do This 'Til We Free Us: Abolitionist Organizing and Transforming Justice*, she recounts the story of how she learned the idea of *hope as a discipline*:

The idea of hope being a discipline is something I heard from a nun many years ago who was talking about it in conjunction with making sure we were of the world and in the world. Living in the afterlife already in the present was kind of a form of escape; but that actually, it was really, really important for us to live in the world and be of the world. The hope that she was talking about was this grounded hope that was practiced every day; that people actually practiced it all the time.

And so, I bowed to that. I heard that many years ago and then I felt the sense of, “Oh my god.” That speaks to me as a philosophy of living, that hope is a discipline that we have to practice every single day. Because in our world, it’s easy



to feel a sense of hopelessness, that everything is all bad all the time; that nothing is going to ever change; that people are evil and bad at the core. It feels sometimes that it's being proven in various, different ways, so I get that, so I really get that. I understand why people feel that way. I just choose differently. I choose to think a different way and I choose to act in a different way. I choose to trust people until they prove themselves untrustworthy.<sup>2</sup>

How is this definition of hope *radical*? Today we use the term “radical” most often in political contexts to describe a fundamental shift in policy (i.e., radical reform) or people on the extreme ends of an ideological spectrum (i.e., religious radicals). Yet, the origin of the word in the English language is the Latin *radicalis*, meaning “of or having roots.” One of the earliest applications of the word was from the fourteenth century in the field of botany to refer to the literal roots of plants.

The hope of my foremothers is indeed rooted. Its tendrils reach deep into a history riddled with stories of trauma and triumph, grief and glee, drama and delight—from the coast of western Africa to the fields of the Mississippi Delta. I have a mentor who says that Black women in the United States have never had a vision of liberation that was not inclusive of everyone. This, despite the generations of violence, neglect, and abuse Black women have been subjected to in the United States.

Radical hope is just one expression of what Yolanda Pierce calls *grandmother theology*. Grandmother theology, according to Pierce, is a subset of womanist thought grounded in a generational wisdom that is only possible with a maturity forged by the

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<sup>2</sup> Mariame Kaba, *We Do This 'Til We Free Us: Abolitionist Organizing and Transforming Justice* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2021), 26-27.

passage of time. It provides an alternative way to understand and know God by transporting us back two or more generations into informal sacred spaces where Black women's theological discourse was developed.<sup>3</sup> Places like the church kitchen, where Sister Weldon ministered to my friends and me.

Along the way, the church women in my life helped me uncover three characteristics of radical hope, each of which is tied to a central question that helps us assess the conditions before us.<sup>4</sup>

**1. *Memory as an antidote to death.*** Death is a necessary part of the life cycle. We live and thus we must die. The church mothers in my life taught me that in our tradition death was never final. The ability to access those who had transitioned from this life to the ancestral plane was as simple as calling their name. When we remember them, we transcend the limitations of time and space and allow their stories and experience to anchor and accompany us. Institutions, as entities formed by and made of people, are also subject to a life cycle. This means that they too inevitably must die in their current form. Collective memory helps us glean the lessons of our historical institutions, discern that which we can and should carry forward, and let go of that which no longer serves us.

**Question:** *What is dying here?*

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<sup>3</sup> Yolanda Pierce, *In My Grandmother's House: Black Women, Faith, and the Stories We Inherit* (Minneapolis: Broadleaf Books, 2021), xvii.

<sup>4</sup> These questions were inspired by a conversation with my friend and colleague M. Rako Fabionar during the *How We Deepen Retreat* at the Fetzer Institute (Kalamazoo, Michigan) in October 2019. In his work, Rako's work integrates developmental psychology, wisdom traditions, and cultural arts. He designs and facilitates trainings, experiences, and conferences for purpose-driven organizations and networks committed to equitable and regenerative futures. I am grateful to count him among the teachers I have had the privilege to learn from on this journey.

2. ***Imagination as a pathway to resurrection.*** There are some institutions, ideologies, and theologies that are dead and need to stay that way. But for that we collectively deem worthy of preservation for the sake of our communal wholeness and wellbeing, there is a way to breathe new life into it. We simply need to open the eyes of our imagination to see beyond our current circumstances into the possibility of something new. The Christian tradition places a great deal of value on the role of resurrection. The belief that Jesus lived, died, and rose again is a basic tenet of my faith. The gospels tell stories of Jesus traveling and bringing back people from the dead. From the church mothers, I learned that the same creative spirit that allowed Jesus to perform his many miracles is present within us. Our job is to slow down long enough to pay attention to that which is yearning to be (re) born.

**Question:** *What wants to emerge?*

3. ***Living as a testament to the possibility of the present.*** Understanding our lives through the lenses of death and resurrection helps us to see the miracle of life. A favorite refrain from the church women of my childhood was to “just keep living.” It was a declaration that change is the one thing that we can be sure of in our lives. They understood faith is not the absence of doubt, but rather *trust in the absence of certainty*. When we let go of our obsession with certainty, our attempts to exercise control over our future, or replay the mistakes of our past, we find ourselves better able to see miracles that are happening right now.

**Question:** *What is already blooming beautifully in the world?*

These themes and questions have become mantras in my faith journey. More than words, they are the prayers that I repeat

when I feel the cold and slow creep of hopelessness enter my psyche.

## **Love Letters of Radical Hope**

It is the second lesson from the church women—the gift of imagination—that I find myself returning to time and again as I navigate the uncertain terrain that is American life in the early twenty-first century.

What a time to be alive! We are not the first, nor (God willing) shall we be the last group of human beings to live through an apocalypse. During my second semester of seminary, as I familiarized myself with ancient Greek as a way of reading the New Testament anew, I learned that the root of the word apocalypse means “to uncover.” It just so happens that three decades of my life occurred alongside a cultural inflection point with some of the deepest and most explicit moments of uncovering in the last half-century.

In the United States, these moments of uncovering have largely occurred around the topics considered impolite for dinner conversation, including race, religion, politics, gender, and sexuality. Clearly there is a reckoning afoot. Those whose voices for the first two centuries of our country’s history were largely ignored—women, people of color, migrants, religious minorities, and our LGBTQ siblings—are beginning to break through. The response to these changes has not been welcomed by all segments of our society. Indeed, some believe that uplifting the voices of others somehow silences their own. Rather than moving toward difference and seeing it as an asset to our lives, they see it as an existential threat to the thriving of our democracy.

We are at the beginning and the end—a birth and a death. What has become clear to me is that the crisis before us is deeper than any surface-level disagreements about public policy; but rather

it is indeed a spiritual crisis over the identity of our country. When a wound has been inflicted, or in this case uncovered, we do not call those who caused the harm to fix it. Rather, we lean on the healers, like the church mothers of my childhood, to nurse us back to health. I am convinced that the healing we need and seek can be found within the genius of our communities if we simply pay attention.

In 2014, I founded Faith Matters Network, a womanist-led organization focused on equipping faith leaders, community organizers, and activists—modern day healers—with tools for connection, spiritual sustainability, and accompaniment. Our tagline, “Healing the Healers,” speaks to our deep desire to care for those who are doing the important restorative work to heal our communities. We believe that care—for self, others, and community—is the fuel for transformative social movements. Over the past six years, we have worked alongside folks on the frontlines of these moments of apocalyptic transformation. They include rural pastors who directly challenge white nationalist groups in their hometowns, young organizers who fight for reforms in the criminal justice system, and activists who seek care after years of placing their bodies in harm’s way.

The book that follows is an attempt to capture some of the lessons I have learned along the way through engaging in this work. It is a series of love letters to the people in my life—past, present, and future—who embody this legacy of radical hope in their very beings. Some are personal heroes who planted seeds that I harvested. Others are family members and mentors who taught me how to tend to the gardens before me. The final group are playground prophets—those who are coming after me—who will cultivate their own fields of dreams. They are people who continue to help shape me, inspire me, and push me to apply the arts of healing to the discipline of hope. *All are my beloveds.*

This book is also a narrative of my unfolding grief journey as a daughter coming to terms with the death of her beloved mother. My mama, Christine Bailey, was one of the finest church women I have known. Beautifully flawed, fun-loving, wise, and resilient, the way she lived her too short life was radical hope made manifest. She loved God, her family, and her community with all of herself. She died of metastatic breast cancer on May 7, 2016. I miss her every day.

I have found that addressing such tender topics requires a type of vulnerability that does not come naturally to me, so I am using an old form of the written word, letters, as a window into my own story and perhaps an entry point into some bigger questions about faith, community, belonging, and the future that so many of us are asking in this season. I chose the missive as my vehicle for sharing these lessons, in part because letters are personal. They are intimate. They have a way of making people feel special when they receive them. My wish is that you may find a bit of yourself in these letters, and that through my story you will find a pathway back to your own. Perhaps you will find the inspiration to write someone in your life who inspires you with their radical hope.

At the center of this work are those Black women who have shaped and guided me along the way—the elders that I aspire to be like and the young women who push me to be and do better. I learned at a young age that growing old is a gift and not a promise.

Sandra Bland did not get to become an old Black woman.

Breonna Taylor did not get to become an old Black woman.

Atatiana Jefferson did not get to become an old Black woman.

Aja Raquell Rhone-Spears did not get to become an old Black woman.

Oluwatoyin Salau did not get to become an old Black woman.

None of them made it to their thirty-fifth birthday. Each was the victim of violence and systems that were not designed to protect Black women nor see us as worthy of care. May this book be a blessing to their memories.

With tenderness,

Jennifer

*May 2021*

## Memory: What Is Dying?

“I used to think it was my rememory. You know. Some things you forget. Other things you never do. But it’s not. Places, places are still there. If a house burns down, it’s gone, but the place—the picture of it—stays, and not just in my rememory, but out there, in the world. What I remember is a picture floating around out there outside my head. I mean, even if I don’t think it, even if I die, the picture of what I did, or knew, or saw is still out there. Right in the place where it happened.”

— Toni Morrison, *Beloved*