

STAYING AWAKE

The Gospel for Changemakers

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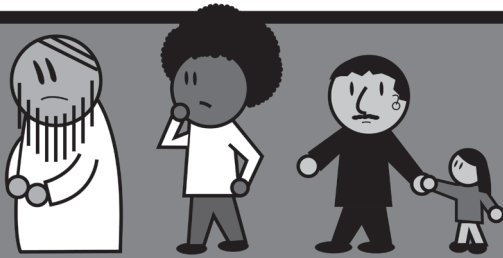
EPILOGUE

Staying Awake during the George Floyd Uprising

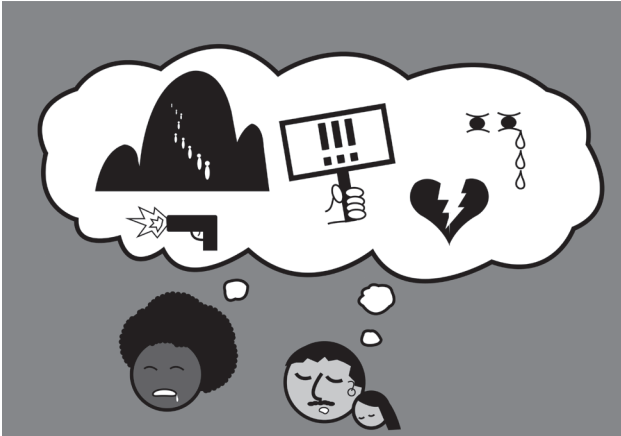
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**WHEN JESUS WAS ABOUT
TO DIE, HE WENT TO A GARDEN**

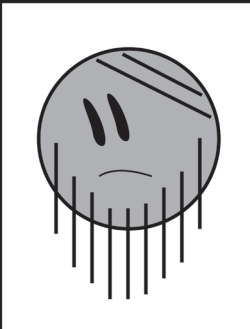


**...HE TOLD EVERYONE WHO
FOLLOWED HIM TO STAY AWAKE**



**IT WAS HARD TO STAY AWAKE.
THEY'D DONE SO MUCH, AND ALL OF THIS
WAS EMOTIONALLY EXHAUSTING.**

**JESUS WENT OFF
AND PRAYED HARD,
CRYING WITH GOD
AND HAVING ALL
SORTS OF SPIRITUAL
REVELATIONS**



**...AND THE
DISCIPLES
KEPT
SLEEPING.**

**THREE TIMES JESUS
CAME BACK, SAYING:**



BUT THEY KEPT SLEEPING

**AND EVEN NOW, MORE THAN 700,000 NIGHTS
LATER, WHEREVER YOU ARE IN THE WORLD, JESUS
NEVER STOPS ASKING YOU TO STAY AWAKE...**



**...AWAKE TO THE SUFFERING OF THE WORLD,
TO OUR OWN SOULS,
TO THE AMAZING MIRACLE OF BEING ALIVE.**

BUT STAYING AWAKE IS HARD WORK. IT'S EASY TO NUMB OUT, OR GET DISTRACTED, OR HIDE IN OUR LITTLE HOLES...



...IT'S SO HARD THAT WE HAVE TO CHANGE OUR WHOLE LIVES NOT TO FALL ASLEEP ON GOD.

HERE'S THE CHOICE WE HAVE EVERY DAY:



**LIFE GIVES US SOMETHING.
SOMETIMES IT'S BAD NEWS,
SOMETIMES IT'S SOMETHING GREAT,
SOMETIMES IT'S BOTH OR NEITHER.**

**WE CAN BECOME OBSESSED WITH IT. CLUTCH IT.
NEVER STOP THINKING ABOUT IT.
WE GRASP ON BECAUSE WE'RE AFRAID OF
WHAT WILL HAPPEN IF WE LOSE IT.**

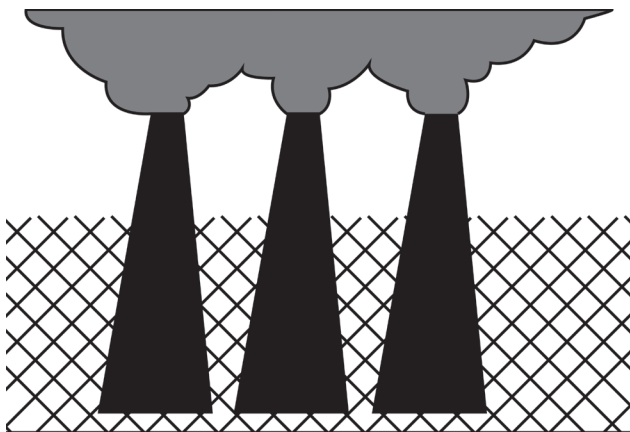


**WE START TO ROT IN THE LANDFILL
OF OUR OWN MAKING.
WE GET LOST IN THE NUMBNESS.**



**WE SET UP SYSTEMS OF VIOLENCE TO PROTECT THE
THINGS WE WANT. TRAPPED IN A SCARCITY MINDSET,
WE BELIEVE THAT IF WE HAVE SOMETHING, THAT
MEANS THAT OTHERS CAN'T HAVE THAT THING.**

**WE START OPPRESSING EACH OTHER,
THE EARTH, AND OURSELVES.**



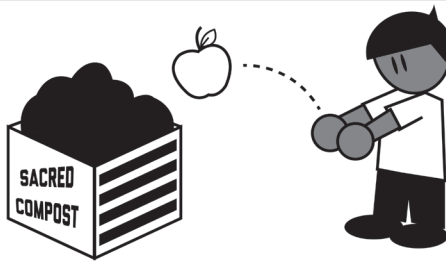
THE EMPIRE—THE POWERS OF DOMINATION AND OPPRESSION—SELLS US LIES, WHICH MAKES US MORE SCARED. MULTIPLIED DAY AFTER DAY, GENERATION AFTER GENERATION, SOCIETY AFTER SOCIETY, WE FEED INTO THE EMPIRE.

BUT THERE IS ANOTHER WAY TO HOLD THE THINGS LIFE GIVES YOU. THERE'S AN ALTERNATIVE TO THE LANDFILL: THE COMPOST PILE.

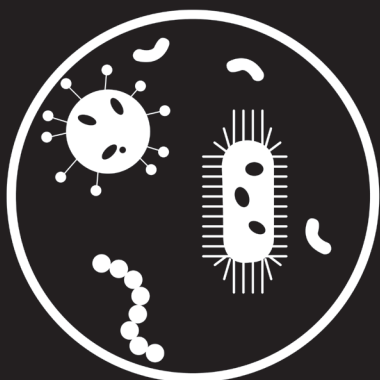




**IN COMPARISON TO A LANDFILL,
WHERE THERE ISN'T ENOUGH OXYGEN FOR
THINGS TO DECOMPOSE AND TURN INTO SOIL,
THE COMPOST PILE TRANSFORMS THINGS.**



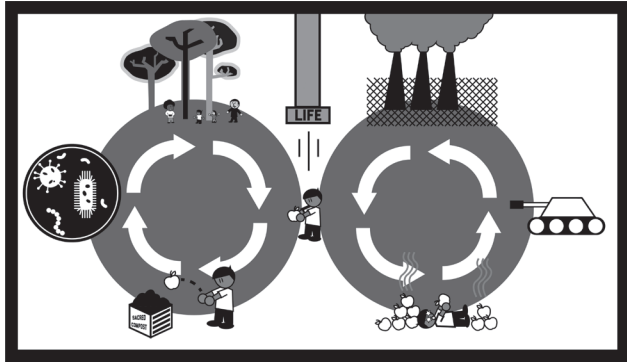
**IT'S AN ACT OF FAITH TO
TOSS THINGS INTO A
COMPOST PILE, BECAUSE
THEN YOU CAN'T HOLD ONTO
THEM ANYMORE.**



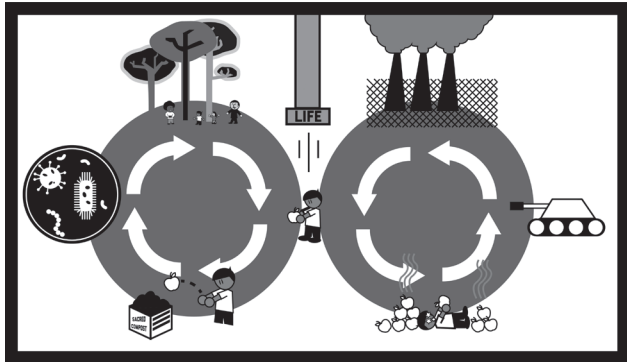
ONCE IT'S OUT OF OUR HANDS AND INTO THE COMPOST PILE, GOD—THROUGH MICROBIOLOGY—DOES SOMETHING AMAZING. GOD TAKES THE MOST STUCK PARTS OF OUR LIVES AND TURNS THEM INTO THE CONDITIONS OF LIFE AGAIN.



DAY AFTER DAY, GENERATION AFTER GENERATION, SOCIETY AFTER SOCIETY, THIS IS WHAT BUILDS THE "NEW CITY." THE RESULT IS NOT ONLY A MORE FULFILLING LIFE BUT A MORE FLOURISHING WORLD. A WORLD WITH ABUNDANCE. THE ABUNDANCE CONVEYS A TRUTH TO YOU THAT FILLS YOU WITH LOVE.



**WE CHOOSE BETWEEN THESE TWO CYCLES
PRETTY MUCH EVERY MOMENT OF EVERY DAY—
IN OUR WORDS, OUR ACTIONS, OUR INACTIONS,
OUR COMPLICITY, OUR ACTIVISM, AND SO FORTH.**



**WHEN JESUS SAYS TO “STAY AWAKE,” HE MEANS
DON’T EVER TAKE YOUR EYES OFF OF THESE TWO
LOOPS, BECAUSE THAT’S WHEN THE EMPIRE SNEAKS
IN. WHETHER LIFE GIVES US THE POLLUTION OF THE
EMPIRE, THE FRUIT OF THE KINGDOM, OR SOMETHING
ELSE, THE OPTIONS ARE ALWAYS THE SAME:
OFFER IT TO GOD OR CLUTCH IT TOO TIGHT.**

THIS BOOK TALKS ABOUT WHAT CHRISTIANS DO TO STAY AWAKE



WORSHIP: LOVING GOD AS A
COMMUNITY. WORSHIP IS LOVE
TRAINING, THAT IS, IT INCREASES OUR
CAPACITY TO LOVE GOD AND
THEREFORE LOVE EVERYTHING



CENTERING MARGINALIZED VOICES:
SETTING THE EXPERIENCES OF
PEOPLE MOST MARGINALIZED BY
SOCIETY AT THE CENTER OF OUR
WORK



PRAYER: PAUSING TO RECONNECT
WITH GOD AND THE WORLD GOD SEEKS
TO CREATE

GROUPS: MEETING WITH A SMALL
CIRCLE OF PEOPLE TO CONFIDE IN
DEEPLY AND JOURNEY TOGETHER



SABBATH: A WEEKLY DAY
DEDICATED EXCLUSIVELY TO
FINDING REST AND
DELIGHT IN GOD

LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT:
GROWING YOUR—AND YOUR
COMMUNITY'S—CAPACITY TO
MOBILIZE PEOPLE AND
RESOURCES TO AFFECT CHANGE



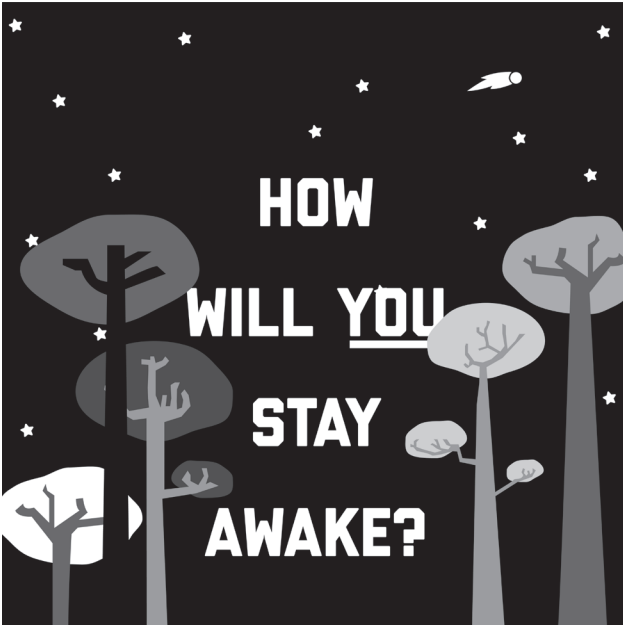
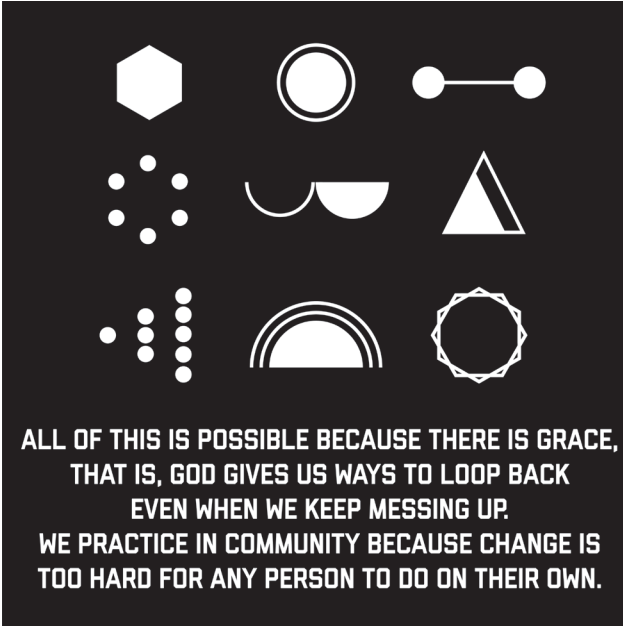
PRACTICING GENEROSITY: AN
ECONOMIC REBELLION AGAINST
THE EMPIRE. PRACTICING
GENEROSITY COMMITS US TO
LIVING ABUNDANTLY



PLANTING: STARTING NEW
THINGS—A GROUP, A
MOVEMENT, A BUSINESS, A
CHURCH—DEDICATED TO
LIBERATING LOVE



PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER:
INTENTIONALLY FINDING SPACE
AND TIME TO ENGAGE IN
THE OTHER EIGHT PRACTICES
CONSISTENTLY



INTRODUCTION

*Until the killing of Black men, Black mothers' sons,
becomes as important to the rest of the country as the killing
of a white mother's son, we who believe in freedom cannot
rest until this happens.*

—Ella Baker

On the third night of the protest, someone brought a portable firepit—the kind you find at a hardware store next to the tiki torches—and started a fire to warm the shivering activists at the Fourth Precinct shutdown. Everyone was stressed from the day of fighting for Black bodies, and the firepit released a delicious warmth that slowly loosened us up.

Jamar Clark had been shot by a police officer three days earlier, the first death in Minneapolis in the new rise of #BlackLivesMatter activism. In a flash, people from across the city crowded to the Fourth Precinct police station, where we set up tents and water stations and made clear demands for a transparent investigation of Mr. Clark's shooting.

After days of this, someone in the crowd unclipped a speaker from their backpack and started playing music with heavy bass, the kind of song with invisible hands that compel your hips to swivel. Whether it be on account of my hips or their sheer enthusiasm, some young activists I had just met pulled me into their dance circle. We danced hard, as if the choice was between the dance floor and busting car windows down Broadway Avenue. I was wearing a winter jacket and long underwear—because every activist in Minnesota knows to wear

layers in November—but I got so warm that I unzipped my jacket between songs. My young friends, whom I didn't know before the dance circle, suddenly stopped moving, their eyes wide, their mouths gaping in amazement.

“*Wait*, why are you dressed up like a priest?”

I looked down and realized that I'd worn my protest armor: a black clergy shirt with a white clergy collar.

“I—AM—A—PASTOR!” I yelled over the music.

“But you're, like, young! And you're here! And you dance!”

Funnily enough, this is not the only social justice dance gathering where I've heard that. Even though I have always had young, inspiring, likely-to-break-into-dance Christian leaders in my life, over the years I have learned that this was more the exception than the rule. The average North Minneapolis high schooler might not associate “Christian pastor” with the “dancing fool at a protest.”

But why? Why wouldn't the people who follow Jesus appeal to a generation that is newly animated to change the world? After all, Jesus himself mounted public campaigns that resemble the one at which we were gathered.

Why wouldn't the people who follow Jesus show up at places of great grief across our city? Jesus did, after all, walk miles and miles to cry with the grieving.

Why wouldn't the people of Jesus be able to dance in community? His first miracle was, after all, to transform water into wine at a party.

The short answer is: the church “done messed up.”

The long answer is: the church gets choked up by the spiraling evils of homophobia (the hatred of gayness and queerness), misogyny (the hatred of women), and white supremacy (the hatred of Black people, indigenous people, and

gunmen are on the prowl. And so our dancing became more wary. I felt my body wanting to shrink back, to merge into the darkness away from the crowd, but the firepit continued to radiate its warm invitation to come back to community. Like the ancient fire in the Bible that spiritual leaders stoked so that it was never extinguished,² that firepit cast a glow on our dancing that reminded me there is a grace that will see us through. Do not be afraid. Stay awake.

This is where Jesus comes back in—not just as a nice object lesson, but as a lifesaving conduit of Spirit.

The Spirit was in the fire and its warming;
the Spirit was in our bodies
healing ourselves through dance;
the Spirit was in the vigilant eyes
of people protecting this group;
the Spirit (I like to imagine) was in the hushed whisper
inside the white supremacists' heads, saying, *This is not
who I am*, when they decided to leave.

We're talking high-stakes grace here. Days later, when I wasn't there, five protestors did get shot.³ They survived, but the city of Minneapolis was shaken out of hibernation, and it realized that there was a real—not imagined—threat among us. Hundreds of people flocked to the site after the incident, intent on showing that fear tactics wouldn't work against the hardy Minnesota crowd. This, too, was a movement of the Spirit.

2 "A continuous fire must be kept burning on the altar; it must not go out" (Leviticus 6:13).

3 Tim Nelson, Peter Cox, and Doualy Xaykaothao, "3 Arrested, 1 Released in 4th Precinct Shooting; #Justice4Jamar Demonstrations Continue," MPR News, November 24, 2015, <https://www.mprnews.org/story/2015/11/24/fourth-precinct>.

Struggling for a better world has taught me that justice requires intentionality, which is a less cringey way of saying discipline. It doesn't take much to become outraged about the latest news headline. It takes a little more to do something about it. And it takes even more to keep doing something about it, especially when the road is long and the Empire⁴ intimidates with masks and weapons. It takes the most intentionality of all to become not only doers of justice but also beings of justice.

This is why the people following Jesus came up with practices long before they came up with a written set of beliefs. They knew that if their days were to amount to more than business as usual, they would need habits so deeply ingrained within them that they could stay strong even when people threatened them. They knew that the stakes were high and that if prayer were reduced to a hollow pleasantry, then they'd already lost. They prayed to mend what was broken, revive what had been stepped on, and reconnect what had been disrupted.

This is the revolutionary way of life that this book explores—following Jesus fully with the belief that justice relies on it. This type of Spirit-led justice isn't cold and mechanical; it's warm, it's lively, and it's affectionate. In God, justice is as much about policy and power as it is about firepits and dancing. And so I wrote this book as

1. a love letter to the movement of people who step out of line to struggle for what is right;
2. a love letter to the earth, which has taught me so much about God; and

⁴ In this book, “the Empire” refers to the powers of domination and oppression that extend beyond any one particular individual (see opening illustrations).

3. a love letter to God, who showed up to the scene not in abstract terms but in real and embodied ways.

The first and second on this list—justice seekers and the earth—are facing challenges and turmoil the likes of which we haven't seen in recent memory or maybe ever. The third—God—can love us through the turmoil, and through the cataclysm after that, and the one after that.

It is with a certain urgency that I pass on what my community has learned about this revolutionary way of life, what Christians who practice Christianity in the context of social justice in a twenty-first-century paradigm have started to learn. Years of showing up and preaching, debating and dancing, and praying and striving funnel their way into this book in an effort to ward off the steely despair of our current reality.

Indeed, even the community organizers I work with who aren't Christian agree that it's time that we approach justice differently. In my neighborhood, justice makers follow such predictable patterns, it's almost clichéd. It goes something like this.

The Tragedy of the Organizer

In my neighborhood, brilliant young people who have just graduated from high school or college start as community organizers on exciting and important campaigns, like workers' rights or immigration. The meetings crackle with energy, and these organizers sign up to door knock, or enter data, or say the opening greeting in front of an elected official. Their newly minted critical-thinking skills and down-to-the-bone work ethic enable them to rise quickly through the ranks, and soon they're the ones organizing the door knocks or the meetings

with elected officials. They do good work; the movement advances. The bond within the movement is like those mountain expedition troops who bravely lived in caves during blizzards in order to reach peaks that look down on the clouds. Through all the storms and struggle, these young organizers begin to ascend.

Two years go by. The young organizers, still brilliant, still dedicated, find themselves starting to wither. People talk over each other at meetings, the highs aren't as high anymore, and they become frustrated at that one guy who always elbows his way into the spotlight. All of the good grants are awarded to nonprofits who can afford grant writers but sanitize their work so much it's barely recognizable as progress. Now for every one victory, these young organizers reap five disappointments.

Then the wheels fall off the car. The young activists who started out as shiny as a drum major are now browsing the internet looking for somewhere else to work. Eventually the big glassy skyscrapers downtown gobble them up, and they find a corporate job with humane pay but practices that are so suspect that the new crop of activists come and protest them.

The whole process takes about five years, and it's as painful to watch as a slow-motion heart attack. I've witnessed it in white-led spaces, spaces of color, relatively well-funded spaces, do-it-yourself spaces, and everything in between. Is there a better way?

Love Training

Deep down, we know that the scenario I just described isn't the only way for us to be together. But we also know that the conference room isn't really the place to sort these things

out, nor is the bar, nor even the therapist's office. As wonderful as those places are, we need a place for love training, for increasing our soul's ability to withstand great adversity and navigate complex realities. And it doesn't happen by accident. As one organizer reminded me, getting older might turn us into an adult, but it doesn't imbue us with the wisdom of an elder. Wisdom comes from practice, mistakes, practice, miracles, practice. For as much work as we have to do in the world, we have some work to do inside too, and that interior design doesn't happen by itself.

The nine chapters of this book pace through nine practices that my community has discovered to be the most fruitful in transforming the world and living a meaningful life. Books that introduce people to faith often start with theological categories, like "God" or "salvation." That's not what you will find here. The goal of this book is to get you practicing as soon as possible, which means introducing a practice *before* diving into the belief stuff that I'll introduce as we go. After all, Jesus gave people practices much more than he offered seminary lectures.

How This Book Works

Some of you are primarily thinkers, some doers, and some feelers, and I have tried to include something for each of you in this book. For the thinkers, each chapter explores why we do what we do—for example, why we worship. I tried to write this in a way that is accessible to people encountering this content for the first time. (Good job for stretching yourself and reading this, by the way!)

Understanding something without doing anything, though, leads to stagnant faith. At the end of each chapter, we explore

the *how*: How do you actually pray? Or become a leader? Or read the Bible without wanting to angry-cry into your pillow? The end-of-chapter sections include things as straightforward as worksheets to get you going. Doers will especially appreciate these sections.

A third aspect of this book is poetry and testimonies, which are sprinkled throughout. These community contributions aerate the text and give my community an opportunity to communicate directly with you. Feelers, go to town with these.

You'll see that all of the chapters are related, but I wrote them so that you can read them independently or nonlinearly. I wrote the book this way to make it easier to read with your friends, group, class, or church, so if you miss a week, you won't have to pedal twice as fast just to know what's going on the following week.

Where I'm Coming From

It's important to acknowledge that this book offers an "incomplete cipher," to borrow a phrase from Nate Marshall's essay "Blueprint for BreakBeat Writing."⁵ Marshall was acknowledging that a poetry volume assembled by cisgender men could not possibly encompass the full breadth of the human experience. The same applies for this book. I am but one person writing from a very particular social location. However, one of the intentions of adding community voices throughout this book is to make a slightly more complete cipher. Whether I mention it alongside their name or not, the people who have contributed testimonies to this book are women, men, nonbinary,

5 Nate Marshall, "Blueprint for BreakBeat Writing," *Poetry*, April 1, 2015, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/articles/70207/blueprint-for-breakbeat-writing>.

transgender, disabled, neuroatypical, gay, queer, people who grew up rural or grew up urban, people who are racially mixed, undocumented, Latinx, white, refugee, asexual, Black, Asian, survivors of sexual trauma, and people with varying levels of experience with church and Christianity.⁶

I have spent years in ministry and relationship with these folks, and I consider myself accountable to them in all of my preaching, writing, and teaching. That is one of the reasons I hired as my writing coach the brilliant Chavonn Shen,⁷ whose amazing poetry you will find throughout the book. She knows New City Church (the church I currently pastor and which provided the basis for much of this material) and how to call me out when I mess up!

Lastly, though I have a master's degree in divinity, which is indeed a seminary degree, I am much more a practitioner than a scholar. I am grateful to Dr. Eric Barreto, New Testament scholar at Princeton Theological Seminary and coauthor of *Exploring the Bible*, for taking a look at the biblical claims I make here. Dr. Barreto helped me craft my arguments—but ultimately, all claims are my own, and Dr. Barreto shouldn't be held accountable if something doesn't sound, um, scholarly. Unless noted, all of the biblical citations are from the Common English Bible translation, which I chose for both its accessibility and scholarship.

6 To my understanding, this is the most updated language to refer to each of these groups of people as of the publication of this book. The social justice discourse is evolving at light speed, so I ask for your grace if what was once a helpful title is no longer (as happens so often).

7 The other reason I hired Chavonn is because she is literally a genius.

How I Got Here

A dear friend of mine was recently frantic with planning her wedding. The food, venue, and caterers were all reserved, but the wedding party was being unresponsive about whether they could participate in the ceremony. One afternoon, she was giving me a ride to church, and at a stoplight she texted furiously, “CAN YOU DO THE THING OR NOT DO THE THING?”

While I was worried both for my friend and for our odds of getting to church in one piece, I admired her pragmatism. At some point in the faith journey, people look up to God and say: Can you do the thing or not do the thing? Will you help us or not? Are we going to be okay?

In this regard, I have tried to be straightforward about spiritual practice; namely, if people discover a beloved community that pushes for a more just society without burning people out, I bless it whether or not it’s something that embraces my particular worldview. For this reason (or maybe just to fulfill my wanderlust), I have spent time with indigenous folks in Ecuador; Israelis and Palestinians in the Holy Land; Thich Nhat Hanh’s Zen Buddhist village in France; and the Dalai Lama’s Tibetan community in Dharamsala, India. And truly, each place was amazing. At many of them, I was invited to participate in a religious practice, which I tried for days, months, or even a few years.

Out of all of them, I still choose for myself the nine practices described in this book. In terms of worldview, community building, spiritual transformation, and social change, I found worship, centering marginalized voices, spiritual practices, Life Together groups, Sabbath, leadership development, generosity, planting, and putting it all together to be the most fruitful for myself and my community.

Furthermore, I have worked through every type of training I could—community organizing, social entrepreneurship, project management (did I mention wanderlust?)—and all of these gave me tools for the toolkit but not much of a blueprint for a changed world. That’s why I’ve come to rely on these nine practices. Together they create that blueprint.

If someone were to show me a different religion or spiritual practice that could snatch us from the brink of global collapse, I would start practicing it immediately out of moral obligation. Wouldn’t you? Yet the more paths I wander down, the more those paths lead me to follow Jesus with the nine tried-and-true practices that have actually changed me. These nine practices shaped my life and became this book.

Moreover, by following Jesus, I realized that I have allowed organizers, politicians, and theorists to define justice for me, even though all of them have significant limitations. The more I trust God, the more I realize I need to trust God because the other options are only appealing from a distance.

Where We Need To Go

Consider these words from Michelle Alexander, lawyer and author of the revolutionary book *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*, in her remarks at Union Theological Seminary, where she accepted a position as a visiting professor:

We are called to build a new moral consensus in this country, a revolutionary understanding about who we are as human beings, who we are as children of God, and what we owe one another. And I’m not using this

word, “revolutionary,” mere rhetorical flair. After years of piecemeal policy reform and tinkering with the [mass incarceration] machine, I now finally understand what Dr. King meant when he said—just months before his death, after Selma, after the Civil Rights Act and the Voting Rights Acts have been passed—he told a reporter: “For years I labored with the idea of reforming the existing institutions of the society, a little change here, a little change there. Now I feel quite differently. I think you’ve got to have a reconstruction of the entire society, a revolution of values.”⁸

If what Alexander says is true, then the question becomes not *whether* we need to do some work on our soul to transform our society but *how* we will go about doing it. How do we heal the soul of a planet oppressed by strong-arm dictators? How do we heal the soul of a city bleeding from economic and political segregation? How do we heal the soul of our relationships with our neighbors, with our friends, with our own bodies?

As it turns out, this is not a new problem. The stakes have changed and the context is different, but the simultaneous sacredness and viciousness of the human heart is something God has been trying to heal for millennia. Now is the time for us to rediscover practices that change us—not into an estranged “new” self, but into a richer, more authentic, truer version of the self we’ve always been.

8 Michelle Alexander, presentation on *The New Jim Crow*, Union Theological Seminary, March 4, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T7911PLT5Ks>. Alexander is referencing a quote from King’s interview with David Halberstam in April 1967. Note that the quote from Halberstam’s article says “reforming the existing institutions of the South,” not “society,” as presented in Alexander’s speech.

At the end of Jesus' life, he went with his disciples to pray in a garden. In an incredible display of vulnerability, Jesus turned to his disciples and said, "I'm very sad. It's as if I'm dying. Stay here and keep alert with me" (Matthew 26:38). As Jesus went off to grieve his impending execution, he showed us how alive and vivid prayer can be. He prayed passionately. He cried. He offered his heart back to God. And three times, he came back to visit his friends whom he'd told to stay awake and found they hadn't been able to do it. Each time, the disciples had fallen asleep in the garden. And who wouldn't? They'd been to all of the meetings, all the demonstrations, done all the legwork, and now they were bone-tired. Jesus pleaded with them: Just stay awake! Please just stay awake! "Couldn't you stay alert one hour with me? Stay alert and pray so that you won't give in to temptation. The spirit is eager, but the flesh is weak" (Matthew 26:40–41).

Jesus has not stopped asking us to stay awake. But we won't be able to do so without God's help and a lot of practice.

Let's start practicing.