CHAPTER 7

WE GON' BE ALRIGHT, BUT THAT AIN'T ALRIGHT

The Negro American consciousness is not a product (as so often seems true of so many American groups) of a will to historical forgetfulness. It is a product of our memory, sustained and constantly reinforced by events, by our watchful waiting, and by our hopeful suspension of final judgments as to the meaning of our grievances.

—RALPH ELLISON[1]

PUNCHING BAG

I started having panic attacks after my kids were born. At first I thought I was experiencing the warning signs of a stroke. Heart disease runs in my family, so I was convinced my bad genes were starting to show the signs, and at the age of thirty I thought my life was coming to an end. The disease that took my father, both of my grandmothers, and put all my siblings on high-blood-pressure medication was finally coming for me. I made appointment after appointment with cardiologists. Everything came back normal, sometimes better than normal. But normal results

only caused more stress. I was committed to the idea that I was dying a slow death. I worked out, ate healthy, got my affairs in order, and took out two additional life insurance policies. My partner and I had just bought our first house, we had two beautiful healthy babies (twins), and my career was taking off. By American standards of success, I was right on track. I was living the American queer dream, minus the dog (I am allergic): two kids, a home, white-picket fence, and a beautiful wife. We also had and still have an amazing, supportive friends-and-family network that cares for us, so on the check list of arbitrary life goals, the Loves were winning.

Since life was so good, I could not understand why I was so stressed out. I had nothing to be stressed out about, so it had to be heart disease. It was the only thing that made sense. Until my mother told me she was experiencing panic attacks. Patty? How could the toughest person on the planet suffer from panic attacks? To my knowledge, my mother has never been afraid of anything or anyone. I am sure she has fears but she never expressed them openly to me: as a Black mother she is not supposed to. She has always been a rock of confidence and pride. Patty makes a way out of no way. She is a survivor because Patty may be down, but she is never out. Her strength is incredible. Of course, Patty is not superhuman; she is a Black mother, which the world has decided means a superwoman. Patty was told as a little girl, and it was reinforced when she became a mother, that she could never crack, could never show pain, hurt, or vulnerability; it is her birthright to carry America's racism, sexism, and inequalities on her shoulders and never stress about it. To be a Black mother is to be America's punching bag, as you morph into a shield and take every blow for your family, especially your Black children, that will be thrown by America's White rage. After decades of Patty

enduring America's abuse, her shell was cracking, and as a new mom of two beautiful Black children, my tough shell, which I learned from Patty and grew through America's hate, was cracking too. We were running out of grit.

WE FEEL NO PAIN BECAUSE WE FEEL EVERYTHING

Racism is literally killing Black women and their babies. In the spring of 2018, Linda Villarosa of the *New York Times* wrote a heart-wrenching article meticulously detailing how "Black infants in America are now more than twice as likely to die as White infants—a racial disparity that is actually wider than in 1850, 15 years before the end of slavery, when most Black women were considered chattel."[2] The article goes on to rightfully contend that Black women are dying during pregnancy because of the racism they experience inside and outside of labor rooms. In the 1960s the United States ranked twelfth in Black infant mortality rates among developed countries; fifty-plus years later, the US is now thirty-second out of the thirty-five wealthiest nations.[3] Villarosa goes on to explain that "education and income offer little protection" for Black women.[4] For example, a Black woman with an advanced degree is more likely to lose her baby than a White woman with less than an eighth-grade education. Black women are four times more likely to die from pregnancy-related causes than White women. Tennis star and multimillionaire Serena Williams described to the world on her Facebook page how her concerns were ignored by the medical staff while she was giving birth to her first child. Williams has a well-documented history of pulmonary embolism, the sudden blockage of an artery in the lung by a blood clot. Blood clots are common side effects when giving birth by caesarean section. After she was treated, but still suffering,

surgery revealed that Williams had a large hematoma, a collection of blood, in her abdomen. Williams needed more surgeries and spent six weeks bedridden. The disregard of her concerns and her medical history put her life in danger. Williams's story is that of thousands of Black mothers fighting for their lives and the lives of their children at one of the most vulnerable times in a woman's life. And Williams is a world-renowned athlete who has access to far more resources than most. What explains this type of Black death? Racism. Villarosa writes:

> The reasons for the black-white divide in both infant and maternal mortality have been debated by researchers and doctors for more than two decades. But recently there has been growing acceptance of what has largely been, for the medical establishment, a shocking idea: For black women in America, an inescapable atmosphere of societal and systemic racism can create a kind of toxic physiological stress, resulting in conditions—including hypertension and pre-eclampsia—that lead directly to higher rates of infant and maternal death. And that societal racism is further expressed in a pervasive, longstanding racial bias in health care—including the dismissal of legitimate concerns and symptoms—that can help explain poor birth outcomes even in the case of black women with the most advantages.[5]

Research shows that White medical students believe that Black people's blood coagulates quicker than Whites, that Black skin is thicker, and that Blacks have less-sensitive nerve endings. Simply put, White doctors believe that Blacks do not feel pain. So, either Black folx are superhuman or not human at all. This is how Black folx are seen and treated as disposable. This is how unarmed Black people get shot or strangled to death by the police or other White men, because White people believe we feel no pain and we have strength beyond the average human.

On the witness stand, Darren Wilson, the cop who shot and killed eighteen-year-old Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, compared Brown to "Hulk Hogan." However, Mike Brown was six-foot-four and so is Darren Wilson. Brown was 292 pounds; Wilson is 210 pounds. Brown was unarmed and Wilson had a Sig Sauer P229 gun at the time he killed Brown. Wilson said he felt like a "five-year-old" because Brown was so big and strong. Wilson's racist views of Brown's strength is no different from White doctors refusing to give Black people pain medication because they believe Black folx have a higher tolerance for pain, or teachers spirit-murdering dark children because they do not see the value of dark children as human beings *with a future that can one day better their lives and the lives of their White children.*

Black mothers fear for all Black life and for their own too. I was mothering in fear. I am mothering under White rage. How do you mother or father or love under White rage? How do you protect when White rage is always raging? Your number one job as a parent is to protect your children from harm but how do you do that when you cannot protect yourself? My children are eight years old. In their eight years of life, Trayvon Martin, Diana Showman, Tamir Rice, Miriam Carey, Malissa Williams, Darnisha Harris, Laquan McDonald, Jeffrey Holden, Rekia Boyd, Eric Garner, and Sandra Bland have all died for being Black. I am in a constant state of worry, pain, and anxiety for myself, my children, and my wife. We are not only Black women but also lesbians, which puts three targets on my family's backs. Honestly, I became obsessed with dying. My mind stayed focused on the idea that I would die and leave my children unprepared for the world. I thought about death more than I thought about living. Still, somehow, unsure as to why I was having panic attacks,

after all I had seen, cried, and obsessed over in the previous seven years, I entered therapy.

THE POLITICS OF RESPECTABILITY

Therapy was healing for me. I had a Black woman therapist, Dr. Vanhoose, whom I could talk to about racism, dark death, and survivor's guilt without feeling like I had to explain to her what those very real things were. She not only listened to me but she understood. She had a set of experiences that were similar to mine as a Black woman in this world. (As a side note, we do not just need more dark teachers but more mental health professionals too.) I knew my experiences being dark in this country were validated by centuries of data, but it felt good and affirming to say it out loud to a professional and be heard, not as whining or complaining but as someone unraveling because of the omnipresence of racism, sexism, homophobia, and injustice. When I was about thirty thousand words into this book and about a year into therapy, Dr. Vanhoose made a pronouncement that helped me heal and at the same time stunned me: she said I was stuck in survival mode. I had given numerous talks on educational survival and was writing a book on survival but I had never applied the idea to myself. She told me that my obsession with dying stemmed from my refusal to embrace my life as it is now. I was still living like that little girl in Rochester, New York, who could not make any mistakes, who witnessed her community overtaken by drugs and crime, and who had never let her guard down. I did not know how to thrive even as I was writing about it.

The MIT economist Peter Temin concludes that to escape poverty you need almost *twenty years* with nothing going wrong in your life.[6] I was at the twenty-year mark. My father had died when I was seventeen, one of the

biggest losses in my life. Since his death, I had not made a single mistake. I had not let anything go wrong in my life. Every decision was calculated. I controlled for every variable, seen and unseen. I trusted no one and stayed on my toes. I somehow instinctually knew that I could not make one mistake—that nothing could go wrong or I would never have the life I dreamed about, which was not much. My dreams were not filled with fancy cars, mansions, and lots of money; I dreamed of a life of comfort. All I wanted was not to live paycheck to paycheck.

I told myself when I left Rochester for college at age seventeen that I would never make the mistakes my parents had made and I would never let this world beat me down. I would win at all costs, always with my integrity intact. Meaning I would outsmart, outmaneuver, and outpace anyone. My worldview was drenched in a politics of respectability; I could avoid racial and gender discrimination and harassment by behaving to White folx' standards for Black folx. Politics of respectability is Black folx' version of being the "model minority"; both were born out of anti-Blackness. As I got older and understood that no level of respectability could save my life or my family's lives, and that I could not control Whiteness, I began to panic. I realized I could not outsmart dark death. My nice respectable routine that I practiced in my head in anticipation of being pulled over by the cops—which started with me "accidentally" pulling out my University of Georgia ID before my driver's license so the cops would see I am an educated dark person, and speaking in my professor's voice, which I do not really have—would not stop me from being killed by a cop. I live in the state where a police officer was caught on a dashboard camera telling a White woman, "We only kill Black people."[7]

I was writing about how being Black was exhausting and living that exhaustion at the same time. I did not know how to thrive. I had everything I had ever wanted and was terrified it all would be taken away from me just for being Black. I could not enjoy the present because I was always worried about the future. Life was a constant chess game that I could no longer manipulate, and now there were additional pieces, my family. When I was the only player on the board I had to worry about, it was stressful but manageable. Now, my chessboard was complicated by the most vulnerable pieces—dark children. And I never really controlled the board at all. America allows only a few dark folx to thrive, and I felt like my time was running out and now my children would be there for my downfall.

Dr. Vanhoose told me that I had not enjoyed my life in years. I had not truly lived in years. I had so much to celebrate but could not do so because I thought everything had an expiration date on it due to racism, sexism, and homophobia. I had never thought of myself as living in survival mode—maybe as an educator but not as my full self. Her words rang in my head. How could I be wrong for being perfect? How could being methodical not be good? Dr. Vanhoose simply telling me to live was freeing. She told me that I needed to work on controlling my thoughts and recommended meditation and mindfulness training. I needed these things in order to be well. I still worry; I still panic but not as much. Her asking me to be well changed how I looked at the world. I could not let the thought of racism take my happiness, as it could take my life too. I had to choose the one I could control. I spent so much time thinking about how to win against racism—a game you cannot win—that I did not spend any time thriving.

ALRIGHT AND WELL (THERE'S A DIFFERENCE)

Toni Cade Bambara's novel *The Salt Eaters* opens with a question that haunts the text's Black female protagonist, Velma Henry, and her community: "Are you sure, sweetheart, that you want to be well?"[8] Velma attempted suicide, overwhelmed by her countless and never-ending responsibilities as a mother, a wife, a civil rights activist, and a leader in the community. Minnie Ransom is the town's healer. Minnie is versed in African and Afro-Caribbean spiritual and healing traditions. Throughout the book, at critical points, Minnie tells Velma and other town members, "A lot of weight when you're well. Now, you just hold that thought."[9] The racial, sexual, and environmental injustices Velma has faced in being everything for everybody have made her sick and left her wanting to end her life. To complicate matters, the people of Velma's community are searching for their wellness but feel beholden to a nuclear plant, where Velma works as a computer programmer, which provides jobs for the community yet is slowly poisoning everyone. Although Velma is the main character who is ill, everyone is sick. In the novel, Bambara positions wellness as a choice, a type of freedom that comes when you let go of your fears and move your anger into a space of healing.

Wellness is wisdom and being well is hard work. Minnie tells Velma, "Give it up, the pain, the hurt, the anger, and make room for the lovely things to rush in and fill you full. Nature abhors a so-called vacuum, don't you know?"[10] Velma has flashbacks to police brutality, her miscarriage, her past lover who was beaten at an antiwar rally and left a quadriplegic, her experiences dealing with gender oppression doing civil rights work, her dissipating marriage, and nuclear destruction. She has to confront her

past and her fears of the future to seek wellness. Velma also confronts the pain of her ancestors, who are called the Mud Mothers in the book. She rejects them at first, but once she submits to the Mothers the wounds on her wrist from her attempt at suicide are healed. The Mothers and Minnie provided a space for Velma to heal in her world, which was chaotic and filled with injustice. The ways in which Velma was *holding* her stress, her memories of her life, her emotions of her life, and the memories that were passed down to her, were killing her. She did not know what it meant to be well, and what she was holding on to did not allow her to be well; she was content being alright. Alright will kill you.

The Salt Eaters is a book about healing but healing that centers race, racism, culture, history, gender, community, justice, environmental concerns, and humanity. As abolitionists we must be well; we cannot settle for just being alright. Wellness is a part of social justice work. There must be an inner life that refuses to be treated less than human. I had to choose to be well; I had to choose to have an inner life; I had to choose to be vulnerable, to find my own sovereignty rooted in Black joy, Black love, and humanity regardless of America's hate for me and mine. *The Sovereignty of Quiet: Beyond Resistance in Black Culture* by Kevin Quashie reminds me, "As an identity, Blackness is always supposed to tell us something about race or racism, or about America, or violence and struggle and triumph or poverty and hopefulness. The determination to see Blackness only through a social public lens, as if there were no inner life, is racist—it comes from the language of racial superiority and is a practice intended to dehumanize Black people."[11] Dark folx have to choose to see ourselves beyond our protest, beyond our fight for justice; we are more than just resistance. Fighting for

justice shows how human and how loving we are. But to be fully human is to know yourself beyond the fight, to have an inner self that can be quiet and enjoy life.

INTERGENERATIONAL HEALING

In the groundbreaking film *Daughters of the Dust* (1991), written and directed by Julie Dash, the character Nana Peazant speaks these weighty words to her grandson: "I am trying to teach you how to touch your own spirit, Eli."[12] Nana, the matriarch of the family, is helping Eli, her grandson, reconcile his two souls: African and African American, a concept Du Bois called "double consciousness."[13] Nana explains to Eli, whose ancestors were enslaved from West Africa, that their cultural wisdom, memories, and creativity thrive inside him, regardless of his seemingly hopeless reality. Nana is asking Eli to understand that to be well he has to work to recognize the pain of his ancestors and the beauty and resiliency of that pain that lives inside of him. Eli is not alone even if he feels like it because he can "touch your own spirit." Which means that knowing who you are, regardless of what America and this anti-Black world throws at you, is healing. Eli is in search of an emotional, physical, social, and spiritual outlet for his pain, similar to Velma in *The Salt Eaters*. Both Eli and Velma experience the everyday trauma of being dark but also the historical trauma that has been passed down from their ancestors; they cannot heal without addressing their ancestors' trauma and sacrifices, and then their own. Thus, healing must be intergenerational, and healing is different for different people. Dark folx heal in ways that are unrecognizable to White folx because Whiteness is why we are in trauma in the first place. Our healing practices differ from those of White folx, but we all have to get well. Additionally, while trauma is passed

down, so must wisdom be passed down from one generation to the next. We all, especially young people, must learn from our elders. Elders provide firsthand knowledge that cannot always be summed up in a textbook or magazine; abolitionists sit at their elders' feet for guidance and understanding, and to learn from their mistakes. At times abolitionists do more listening than talking, especially in the presence of wise counsel. An abolitionist movement must be inter-generational, filled with generational knowledge from the young and the old. Bakari Kitwana makes it plain, when he writes,

> As long as the older generation fails to understand the new Black youth culture in all of its complexities, and as long as the younger generation fails to see its inherent contradictions, we cannot as community address the urgent crises now upon us, particularly those facing Black American youth. New ways of relieving current forms of oppression can be implemented only when the younger and older generations do so together. Our collective destiny demands it.[14]

Kitwana's words are directed toward the lives of Black Americans, but his message can be placed on the lives of all dark folx trying to undo centuries of pain and trauma while remaining hopeful and freedom dreaming.

For me, I had to center myself and practice being well daily. In no way does being well somehow stop injustice, but it does allow you to be your best self while fighting injustice. Being well helps you fight racism with love, grace, and compassion and frees mental space to freedom-dream and to give them hell, and then retreat to your community of love for support, fulfillment, and nourishment—your homeplace. The goal is to be whole, to

bring your full self to the work of abolitionist teaching. It does not mean the work of wholeness is complete, because we are all works in progress; being well is to join others in the fight for humanity and antiracism in love and solidarity. Being well is comforting our internalized White supremacy, sexism, homophobia, transphobia, Islamophobia, classism, ableism, and the rage that comes as a result of these hateful ideas. All of me, every drop of my Blackness—ancestors included—queerness, Black womanness, motherness, and everything else in between, must come to the work of abolitionist teaching because "the day all the different parts of me can come along, we would have what I would call a revolution."[15]

WHITE WELLNESS

Whiteness cannot enter spaces focused on abolitionist teaching. Whiteness is addicted to centering itself, addicted to attention, and making everyone feel guilty for working toward its elimination. Whiteness will never allow true solidarity to take place. Those who cling to their Whiteness cannot participate in abolitionist teaching because they are a distraction, are unproductive, and will undermine freedom at every step, sometimes in the name of social justice. Being an abolitionist means you are ready to lose something, you are ready to let go of your privilege, you are ready to be in solidarity with dark people by recognizing your Whiteness in dark spaces, recognizing how it can take up space if unchecked, using your Whiteness in White spaces to advocate for and with dark people. And you understand that your White privilege allows you to take risks that dark people cannot take in the fight for educational justice. Wendy Kohli says it best: "The times require us to have the courage to be dangerous, at the same time recognizing that there are differential

dangers. Not all teachers are at equal risk; much depends on how you are positioned, on your identity(ies), on your particular situation."[16] Abolitionist teaching means putting something on the line in the name of justice. Wanting dark folx to thrive and giving up power and positions in order for dark folx to do so.

The work of recognizing and checking White emotionality is done before you enter dark spaces. White folx have to get well on their own terms before they engage with abolitionist teaching. More than just attending antiracist workshops and culturally relevant pedagogy professional developments, they need to come to terms with what Whiteness is, how violence is needed to maintain it, and how their successes in life are by-products of Whiteness. White folx cannot lose their Whiteness; it is not possible. But they can daily try to deal with and reject the Whiteness that is obsessed with oppressing others, centering itself, and maintaining White supremacy through White rage. Being well and White is rejecting Whiteness for the good of humanity. The same goes for patriarchy, homophobia, sexism, transphobia, Islamophobia, classism, ableism, and xenophobia.

WELLNESS IN SCHOOLS

I have had multiple points of view of education, so I know firsthand that education as we know it cannot save dark children either. At both public and charter schools, I have watched Black joy be squeezed out of students and staff by Whiteness. I have seen how a school founded on the African principles of community and love can be intentionally thrown to the side for standardized testing accountability measures, stringent procedures that confine creativity for students and staff, and the rush to be the White survivor. White folx' approach to antiracism work in

schools is checking it off their to-do list. I know White administrators and principals who feel uncomfortable speaking about issues of race and racism, but somehow feel comfortable being in charge of a majority-dark teaching staff and student population. I take issue with White school staff members who shy away from speaking out against racism but have no problem controlling dark minds and bodies.

I know from experience, from years of fighting, that school officials often feel the need to control Black bodies (students, staff, and parents) and schools can never be well under those circumstances. This control seems to stem from dark children always being seen as America's property. For schools to be well, and, therefore, the children in them, schools must place more importance on students' mental, physical, and spiritual health than on any test. If students are not well, test scores do not matter. It breaks my heart to talk to a principal who thinks that because test scores are low the school cannot focus on students' emotional well-being. School officials will put everything before students' actual mental health, not understanding that test scores cannot and will not increase until students are healing from trauma and/or mattering to themselves and their community. I have spoken to leaders of schools who understand how racism, Whiteness, and sexism function in schools and want to do something about it, but addressing these issues would mean letting go of their control of Black bodies, losing power, and admitting that they are part of the problem infecting the school.

For schools to be well, educators need to be well. Educators need free therapy, love, compassion, and healing, and to embrace theories that explain why getting well is so hard. Teacher wellness is critical to creating schools that protect students' potential and function as their homeplace.

Educators, students, and parents need to be on a path to wellness together for schools to be sites of healing. Schools cannot be doing just alright; they have to be well by putting everyone's mental health as the first priority and understanding how systems of oppression spirit-murder children.

SURVIVAL VS. FREEDOM

I hate binaries, but I am tired of the long spectrum between survival and freedom. Dark folx' lives are consumed by the two options. We live somewhere between never reaching freedom and never becoming fully comfortable with this reality. When pursuing educational freedom—really, all freedoms—survival cannot be the goal, and finding a place somewhere on the spectrum cannot be, either. The goal must be pursuing freedom at all costs as a collective group of abolitionism-minded people who welcome struggle.

I will end where I started: with W. E. B. Du Bois. Early in Du Bois's career, he proclaimed that America's racism was due to a lack of knowledge. He wrote, "The world was thinking wrong about race, because it did not know. The ultimate evil was stupidity. The cure for it was knowledge based on scientific investigation."[17] He wrote these words in 1894. Ibram X. Kendi reminds us that since then, dark folx have provided countless scientific investigations of our humanity.[18] We have done everything under the sun to matter to the country. We have fought and died for the country. Sued this country and won our rights. Marched and protested while being hit and remained nonviolent. Sung songs about the strangeness of fruit hanging from trees inspired by our resiliency (grit). We have given speeches that the world heard from a podium in Washington, DC, or Selma, Alabama. We have studied at the best schools in the world and produced a body of work

that makes the world better. We create artwork that is a road map to the future of humanity for all. This country kills our babies and we mourn with grace and compassion and use each death as a teaching moment for this country to find its North Star. We teach America every day how to live the words on which they formed this country. As Nikki Giovanni says, "We didn't write a constitution . . . we live one. . . . We didn't say 'We the People' . . . we are one."[19] And we do all of this to just survive. Forty-one years after Du Bois dedicated his life to producing the scientific investigation to prove dark folx deserved to be treated as human, he concluded, "Today there can be no doubt that Americans know the facts; and yet they remain for the most part indifferent and unmoved."[20]

There is only one choice: become an abolitionist parent, teacher, doctor, sanitation worker, lawyer, CEO, accountant, community activist, small business owner, scientist, engineer, and *human.*

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"You Were Meant for Me" by Donny Hathaway, "All I Do" by Stevie Wonder, "You Bring Me Joy" by Anita Baker, and "You Make Life So Good" by Rahsaan Patterson—CHELS

"Be a Lion" by the cast of *The Wiz* and "Believe in Yourself" by Lena Horne—CHANCE

"Isn't She Lovely" by Stevie Wonder and "Believe in Yourself" by Lena Horne—LAURYN

"Motherfather" by Musiq—PATTY AND HONEY LOVE

"Count on Me" by Bruno Mars and "Thank You" by Boyz II Men—GUMBEE

"So Fresh, So Clean" by OutKast and "Back in the Day" by Ahmad—GENE

"Home" by MJ Rodriguez, Billy Porter, and Our Lady J—ROCHESTER, NEW YORK

"Best Friend" by Brandy and "F.U.B.U." by Solange—NATINA, DRINA, AND CUTTS

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"Move On Up" by Curtis Mayfield—HUTCHINS CENTER FOR AFRICAN AND AFRICAN AMERICAN RESEARCH AT HARVARD UNIVERSITY

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"To Be Young, Gifted, and Black" by Nina Simone—ALL MY FORMER STUDENTS