

## **Spirituals and My Transformative Leadership Journey**

Following the model of Dr. Howard Thurman and his use of the Spiritual in *Deep River* and *The Negro Spiritual Speaks of Life and Death*, I too would like to acknowledge these revelatory gifts offered by our ancestors, as pathways to understand and embrace our relationship to the Divine, and as models for transformative personal and collective leadership.

My leadership continues to find roots in the love, vision, and audacious imaginings of my ancestors. Through examples of spirituals as ancestral memories, lessons, and directives, I will share my plans for continued growth and embodiment of transformative leadership and in humility and reverence seek to share my areas of personal growth as I embark on new and unknown frontiers in my work with and in service to others.

### **Spirituals as Connection**

Spirituals for the enslaved permitted one to connect with others, connect to the Divine, and connect with oneself and his/her own voice. With a language not their own, meant for “instruction[al]” purposes only, Africans were able to bridge region, dialect, and culture and to transcend bondage and abuses to the body, mind, and spirit through song. They created a music that resonates and reverberates beyond circumstance and time and that brings into existence (and “makes a way out of no way”) agency, power, and voice.

### **Spirituals as Inspiration for Transformative Leadership**

*“Memory and mourning combine in prophetic insistence on inner change and outer action.”*

*~ Raboteau, xv*

The context of history and the gifts that have been carried by air and memory to rest in our hearts and spirits inform my leadership. Like so many, I come from a monumental legacy of survival and cultivation of culture. And like so many, I carry with me, not as a cross but a crown, the implicit responsibility that is embedded in this legacy.

*“We shall overcome because the arc of the moral universe is long,  
but it bends toward justice.”*

*Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., “Remaining Awake Through a Great Revolution.”  
Speech given at the National Cathedral, March 31, 1968*

I can only hope that any contribution I make adds to the bending of that oft-referenced celestial arc.

#### **“This Little Light of Mine”**

~ continuing to embody practices for understanding, contemplating, and engaging with call and offering creative opportunities for others along their journey ~

#### **“Over My Head”**

~ seeking systemic strategies to build concretized hope, connection, and community~

#### **“There is a Balm in Gilead”**

~ offering ground for communities to consider and mount alternative systems where people can thrive with and through dignity and care ~

**“Sometimes I Feel Like a Motherless Child”**

~ committing to furthering my own global socio-economic, political, theo-ethical knowledge and understanding ~

**“Were You There?”**

~ promising an ancestrally rooted, forward obligated commitment to continue to grow I into and be challenged in my transformative leadership journey~

***This Little Light of Mine: Embodied Care Practice***

*This little light of mine, I'm gonna let it shine.*

*Let it shine, let it shine, let it shine.*

[Leontyne Price sings "This little light of mine" - YouTube](#)

In a disposable world that often discards and disregards, I hope to continue to uplift the creative voice and contributions of our young people and their families through arts exploration and production. I will create more opportunities for young people to develop the understanding between their creative voice and their potential creative contributions in the world through meditation and critical reflection,<sup>1</sup> through arts-based community service, through youth-designed leadership-through-the-arts opportunities, and through “celebration” and “ceremony in building spiritual resilience and validation.

*“...wake up to God and to your mission, seek yourself, get to know yourself, open your heart so that God can talk to you” Grandma Clara, “The Grandmothers”*

***Over My Head: Systemic and Concretized Strategies for Hope***

*Over my head, there is music in the air.*

*Over my head, there is music in the air.*

*Over my head, there is music in the air.*

*There must be a God, somewhere.*

[Kathleen Battle sings "Over my head, I hear music in the air" - YouTube](#)

So many people in our world feel disconnected – disconnected from their communities, from themselves, and from God. For many, this disconnection has only worsened by unmasking racism, classism, sexism, and other destabilizing and oppressive systems during the pandemic. The “disconnection” of marginalized groups has resulted in a de-centering and devaluing of their voices, invalidation of their narratives, and the erection of barriers to accessing sustaining, promotional resources.

At the core of my transformative leadership, I want to offer hope – not lofty, in the clouds hope but tangible, concretized hope. I will share and remind myself of the stories of ordinary-

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<sup>1</sup> Dr. Yong is his “Charge to the Graduates” offered the ‘practice of remembrance’ in which we are “emptied” and permitted to acknowledge the “unique genius and grace” of ourselves and our communities. He charged the graduates “to come out of hiding” “to surrender to your radiance...[and] allow[ing] it to fill the cosmos.” [Pacific School of Religion - 154th Commencement - YouTube](#)

extraordinary leaders in my shared ancestral lineage as inspiration and aspirational templates for moving contemplation and call into action.

My work ahead is in seeking to answer, how can supporting the creative lives of young people and their families not only develop “habits of imagination” (Angela Davis, 2016 Ted) but also ignite and reinforce their agency in confronting unjust systems of oppression and marginalization and in creating their own “new” stories of transformation?

I want to find meaningful and impactful ways for people to tell their own stories/histories and for these tellings to dismantle hegemonic structures and to uplift and validate marginalized communities in the public square. As I argued in a previous reflection, removing people’s presence and importance in the past ostensibly removes them from the possibility of constructing the future and immobilizes the potential of their collective strength, whereas re-insertion and validation in history provides fertile ground for hope.

### ***There is a Balm in Gilead: Community-Generated Alternative Systems***

*There is a balm in Gilead  
To make the wounded whole,  
There is a balm in Gilead  
To heal the sin-sick soul*

[There is a Balm in Gilead - YouTube \(Fisk Jubilee Singers\)](#)

*Howard Thurman states that “He [the slave] straightened the question mark in Jeremiah’s sentence into an exclamation point: “There is a balm in Gilead!”” (Deep River, 56).*

One does not have to seek “balm” outside of oneself or one’s community; “balm” can be self-generative, self-sustaining, and sustainable. In fact, every marginalized communities’ “production” of spiritual, intellectual, and cultural “wealth” can offer the salve needed to address its needs and demands.

Unfortunately, in our current systems, culturally produced “goods” have not necessarily led to culturally directed/experienced rewards due to appropriation, misappropriation, and extraction. In my work, I intend to create and facilitate opportunities for marginalized communities to create their own transformative “balms” or “alternative, sustainable [economic] systems.” In my forthcoming work, I hope to provide ground for truth seeking, truth telling, and meaning making through the creative arts.

I hope to identify and open pathways for additional “balm” creation and avenues for wealth building, alternative economies, and assertion of influence/power through creative means. I am open to possibilities. I hope to bring about gatherings through which our collective imaginations are (as W. Bruggemann offers) “shattering, opening, and inviting,” “radical[ly] criticizing” and “radical[ly] energizing.”

### ***Sometimes I Feel Like a Motherless Child: Connecting with Global Context***

*Sometimes I feel like a motherless child,  
Sometimes I feel like a motherless child,*

*Sometimes I feel like a motherless child,  
A long way from home, a long way from home.*<sup>2</sup>  
[Odetta - Sometimes I Feel Like a Motherless Child - YouTube](#)

Through the spiritual, specifically the sorrow song, one can hear the pain of disconnection from language, family, culture, and homeland. We know historically the disemboweling and disempowering impact of isolation and of being cut-off from the world - and these deleterious impacts remain. When our struggles (and triumphs) are dismembered from the world, all marginalized groups lose power. Our power could be multiplied if we understood our shared experiences and potential collective power. In my transformative leadership journey, I commit to continuing my education about global politics and our social, political, and economic intersections and connections. Additionally, I will use my voice to help others understand our shared humanity and interests in promoting one another. I will do this by creating forums for dialogue and opportunities to express, explore, and experiment through which individual voices and communities are validated, connected, and strengthened.

***Conclusion: Were you there? Continued Commitment for Transformative Leadership Development***

*Were you there when they crucified my Lord?  
Were you there when they crucified my Lord?  
Sometimes it causes me to tremble, tremble, tremble  
Were you there when they crucified my Lord?*

[Were You There \(When They Crucified My Lord\) - YouTube](#) (Danny Rivera, Gavin Rushing)

For me, this song has always resonated on many levels – a call for empathy, a cry for witness, an acknowledgement of solidarity, and a mandate for personal responsibility. And like the words of King and Lorde, this spiritual requires each of us to examine our pivotal, vital, and necessary role in the communities of which we are a part. I have been inspired to consider ways that shared witness to the power and glory of the Divine, even through trial and hardship, can be a source of transformative leadership, and I have been pushed to expand the ways I see my own call to this end.

*“a memory...[is] a promise.” ~ “Solos” (2021 TV Series)*

A memory can be a promise of what we will never be or will never do, and a memory can be a promise of what we will take with us into the future, that will carry us as we are moved to convene, create, and transform. The memories and promises stored in the songs of those who had the audacity to survive despite unspeakable and fully unknowable circumstance drive an ancestrally embedded commitment in me. Although the resound of our collective and communal drums and songs may be dampened by algorithm reinforced, digitally divided, siloed fortresses and rebooted racial strife and terrorism, we can still move memories of courage, faith, and inspiration into bringing forth and creating new songs.

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<sup>2</sup> Howard Thurman offers another analysis of a version of this spiritual. He speaks of a “note of triumph” and “overwhelming poignancy” in our “solitar[y]” “walk” with “God” (*The Negro Spiritual Speaks of Life and Death*, 28).

*“When I dare to be powerful—to use my strength in the service of my vision—then it becomes less and less important whether I am afraid.” ~ Audre Lorde*

I am inspired by countless unknown names and unknown faces of survival and triumph. I am inspired by leaders who walked into their leadership, maybe sometimes afraid but never in fear. I commit to extending grace, courage, humility, and loving support in my work going forward to ensure that generations yet to come can experience and express their full humanity, dignity, and divinely granted co-creator roles in building welcoming and inclusive communities that are beloved, life giving, and creatively generated and sustained.

[Jessye Norman sings "Ride On, King Jesus" at Carnegie Hall - YouTube](#)

[All Night, All Day - Lawrence Brownlee, tenor & Damien Sneed, piano \(arranged by Damien L. Sneed\) - YouTube](#)

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