Sisters of the Yam
Black Women and Self-Recovery

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Reflections of Light

When I wrote *Ain't I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism* twenty years ago, the chapter that most spoke to me was "Continued Devaluation of Black Womanhood." Concluding that chapter, I wrote:

> Widespread efforts to continue devaluation of black womanhood make it extremely difficult and oftentimes impossible for the black female to develop a positive self-concept. For we are daily bombarded by negative images. Indeed, one strong oppressive force has been this negative stereotype and our acceptance of it as a viable role model upon which we can pattern our lives.

Since I first wrote these words, the white-dominated mass media have changed little in the way in which they represent black women. We have changed. In the last twenty years black women have collectively challenged both the racism and sexism that not only shape how we are seen but determine how everyone interacts with us. We have resisted continued devaluation by countering the dominant stereotypes about us that prevail in white-supremacist capitalist patriarchy by decolonizing our minds. Here decolonization refers to breaking with the

ways our reality is defined and shaped by the dominant culture and asserting our understanding of that reality, of our own experience.

In a revolutionary manner, black women have utilized mass media (writing, film, video, art, etc.) to offer radically different images of ourselves. These actions have been an intervention. We have also dared to move out of our "place" (that is away from the bottom of everything, the place this society often suggests we should reside). Moving ourselves from manipulatable objects to self-empowered subjects, black women have by necessity threatened the status quo. All the various groups—white men, white women, black men, etc.—that have imagined that black women exist to be the "mules of the world," providing service to others, have had to cope with our collective refusal to occupy this position. This challenge to the status quo has generated serious anti-black female backlash. The kind of backlash that combines fierce racism with anti-feminism, the kind that journalist Susan Faludi does not even begin to consider in her best selling book *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against Women.* Indeed, Faludi's work erases any focus on the way in which race is a factor determining degrees of backlash. That she could completely ignore the specificity of race, and once again construct women as a monolithic group whose common experiences are more important than our differences, heralds the acceptance of an erasure within the realms of popular feminist books—works written to reach mass audiences—of all the work black women and women of color have done (in conjunction with white allies in struggle) to demand recognition of the specificity of race.

Perhaps no other issue more glaringly showed that masses of white women still do not understand the interconnectedness of systems of domination, of racism and sexism, than the Clarence Thomas Supreme Court nomination hearings. Masses of white women rallied to Anita Hill's defense, all the while insisting that her race was not important and that the "real" issue was gender. Many of them simply would not break through denial and ignorance of the way white supremacy is instutionalized to see that had Anita Hill been a white woman accusing a black man of sexual harassment there would have been no television spectacle exposing her to the voyeuristic gaze of the masses. The forces of white-supremacist patriarchy would have demanded respect for her privacy, for her womanhood, a respect denied Anita Hill. The Thomas hearings served notice to black feminist thinkers and our allies in struggle that we must be ever vigilant in our efforts to resist devaluation, that it is a mistake for us to think that we have "arrived," that our political efforts to transform society and to be seen as subjects and not objects have been realized. That struggle continues.

The rise in black anti-feminism, often spearheaded by a focus on endangered black masculinity, has rekindled false assumptions that black women's efforts to resist sexism and sexist oppression are an attack on black life. To the contrary, renewed black liberation struggle can only be successful to the extent that it includes resistance to sexism. Yet there are masses of black people who are encouraged by sexist and misogynist black male and female leaders to believe that uppity black women are threatening our survival as a race. This backlash requires that those of us who are aware be ever vigilant in our

efforts to educate one another, and all black people, for critical consciousness. Backlash, from whatever source, hurts. It retards and obstructs freedom struggle. Intense attacks help create a context of burnout and despair. It is crucial that black women and all our allies in struggle, especially progressive black men, seize the day and renew our commitment to black liberation and feminist struggle.

In my daily life practice as a teacher, writer, and activist, I work hard to find ways of sharing feminist thinking, black liberation struggle, with diverse groups of people, not just those of us who are involved in academic institutions. Years of inventing strategies to reach a broader audience have convinced me that we need to explore all outlets to share information. It was the success of the self-help book *Women Who Love Too Much* that convinced me that women of all races, classes, and sexual preferences would read work that addressed their concerns and most importantly their pain and their longing to transform their lives. This book, however, like many other self-help books for women, disturbed me because it denied that patriarchy is institutionalized. It made it seem that women could change everything in our lives by sheer acts of personal will. It did not even suggest that we would need to organize politically to change society in conjunction with our efforts to transform ourselves.

Mind you, since I have consistently used self-help literature to work on areas in my life where I have felt dysfunctional, I have tremendous respect for this literature whatever its limitations. For those among us who cannot afford therapy, or who have had endless hours of therapy that just did not work, it helps to have these other guides. For some time now, too, I have seen that we cannot

fully create effective movements for social change if individuals struggling for that change are not also self-actualized or working towards that end. When wounded individuals come together in groups to make change our collective struggle is often undermined by all that has not been dealt with emotionally. Those of us committed to feminist movement, to black liberation struggle, need to work at self-actualization. In the anthology *The Black Woman,* Toni Cade Bambara reminded us that "revolution begins in the self and with the self." She urged us to see self-actualization as part of our political efforts to resist white supremacy and sexist oppression.

Many of us have longed to see the union of our political efforts to change society and our efforts to be individually self-actualized. We have wanted to politicize movements for self-recovery. Yet, working to help educate black females for critical consciousness, I often find that folks felt they did not have time for political work because they felt there were so many things messed up in their psyches, or in their daily lives, that they were just barely keeping a hold on life. Frankly, they are often more concerned with getting their lives together than with larger political issues, issues that did not seem to intersect with this need or promise to enhance this quest. This perspective is understandable, but much too limited. It ignores too much of the world around us. Desiring to create a context where we as black females could both work on our individual efforts for self-actualization and remain connected to a larger world of collective struggle led me to consider writing a self-help book that would especially address our concerns. I felt such a book would speak to

black women and to everyone else that wanted to know us, and perhaps even themselves, better.

Meditating long and hard on Audre Lorde's essay "Eye to Eye" was the catalyst urging me to push harder to write work that would address a wider audience of black women. In her essay, Audre Lorde urges black females to put our struggle to self-actualize at the center of our daily life. She taught us,

> Learning to love ourselves as Black women goes beyond a simplistic insistence that "Black is beautiful." It goes beyond and deeper than the surface appreciation of Black beauty, although that is certainly a good beginning. But if the quest to reclaim ourselves and each other remains there, then we accept another superficial measurement of self, one superimposed upon the old one and almost as damaging, since it pauses at the superficial. Certainly it is no more empowering. And it is empowerment—our strengthening in the service of ourselves and each other, in the service of our work and future—that will be the result of this pursuit.

Living the teaching of Lorde inspired me to write this book on self-recovery, a book that would particularly address the needs and concerns of black women.

In the last twenty years, many black women have had the joy of ecstatic sustained bonding with one another. We have witnessed the power of sisterhood. We have experienced self-recovery. We have known, and continue to know, the rewards of struggling together to change society so that we can live in a world that affirms the dignity and presence of black womanhood. In many ways *Sisters of the Yam: Black Women and Self-Recovery* is a manifestation of that joy and an expression of the awareness that we must be ever vigilant—that the struggle continues.

Introduction

Healing Darkness

Sisters—and you who are our friends, loved ones, and comrades—I greet you in love and peace. This Saturday afternoon is a beautiful spring day, where the world is overflowing with beauty and splendor. Every aspect of nature is full of life. That which appeared dead but was merely dormant is beginning to grow again. Symbolized by holy days that celebrate resurrection and renewal, this is a time for all things to be made new—a joyous time. This morning as I went for walking meditation, I felt as though the world around me—the birds, the flowers, the newly cut green grass—was all a soothing balm, the kind Big Mama would spread on various parts of our body for any little old ailment. We thought her homemade salves had magical healing powers when we were children. Now, I am convinced that the magic, that power to heal, resided in her warm, loving, brown hands—hands that knew how to touch us and make us whole, how to make the hurt go away.

This is a book about healing, about ways to make the hurt go away. Like all the books I have written, it comes to me from places dark and deep within me, secret, mysterious places, where the ancestors dwell, along with

countless spirits and angels. When I was a girl, Mama's father, Daddy Gus, taught me that everything in life was a dwelling place for spirits, that one only had to listen to hear their voices. The spiritual world of my growing up was thus very akin to those described in novels by Toni Morrison, Paule Marshall, or Ntosake Shange. There was in our daily life an ever present and deep engagement with the mystical dimensions of Christian faith. There was the secret lore of the ancestors—the Africans and Native Americans—who had given that new race of black folk, born here on this portion of earth, whole philosophies about how to be One with the universe and sustain life. That lore was shared by the oldest of the old, the secret believers, the ones who had kept the faith. There was the special magic of the Caribbean that was present in the form of Voudoun, that way of working roots my father's mother Sister Ray knew about (or so everyone said). And I remember most that people feared her—that she was seen as a woman of power.

Having lived in a segregated southern black world and in an integrated world, where black people live with and among whites, the difference I see is that in the traditional world of black folk experience, there was (and remains in some places and certainly in many hearts) a profound unshaken belief in the spiritual power of black people to transform our world and live with integrity and oneness despite oppressive social realities. In that world, black folks collectively believed in "higher powers," knew that forces stronger than the will and intellect of humankind shaped and determined our existence, the way we lived. And for that reason these black people learned and shared the secrets of healing. They knew how to live well

and long despite adversity (the evils caused by racism, sexism, and class exploitation), pain, hardship, unrelenting poverty, and the ongoing reality of loss. They knew joy, that feeling that comes from using one's powers to the fullest. Despite the sexism of that segregated black world, the world of spirituality and magic was one where black women teachers, preachers, and healers worked with as much skill, power, and second sight as their black male comrades. Raised in such an environment, I was able to witness and learn. And yet, like the old ones before me who had been required by circumstance to willingly or unwillingly leave their ancestral home, I left that world of my beginning and entered the strange world of a predominantly white elitist university setting. I took with me to that world, however, ways of knowing and understanding reality I was determined to keep and hold. They were my links to life-affirming black cultural traditions. And indeed it was the will and way of the ancestors that sustained me during that time of my life, that sustains me still.

For the past twenty years I have been most concerned with learning book knowledge about many subjects. I decided to be a writer when I was still at home, still in grade school, and of course made public announcements and shared my work with family and friends. Everyone agreed that I had talent. I could act and I could write. I went away to college to study drama and everyone believed that I would one day come home, to the world of my ancestors, and be a teacher in the public schools. I did not return. In the years before she died, Baba, my Mama's mother, would often ask me "Glory, how can you live so far away from your people?" I knew what her words meant. She was asking how it was I could live without the daily

communion and community of ancestors, kin, and family—how I could sustain my reason for living since I had been raised to believe that these connections gave life substance and meaning. I had no answer for her. I hung my head so that she could not see the tears in my eyes. I could not honestly say that I had found new community, new kin. I only knew that I was inhabited by a restless roaming spirit that was seeking to learn things in a world away from my people. Much of what I learned in that world was not life-affirming. Longing to become an intellectual, I stayed in college. I learned some important information. I became a strong and defiant critical thinker expressing my ideas publicly in the production of feminist theory, literary criticism, and more recently, cultural criticism. The artist inside me was most visible in private space. There I thought and dreamed about the world of my ancestors. I longed for the richness of my past, to hear again the wisdom of the elders, to sit at their feet and be touched by their presence.

Living and working in predominantly white settings, in situations where black people seem confused and uncertain about politics and identity, I began to think deeply about the way in which the collective lives of black people in contemporary white-supremacist patriarchy have become fundamentally estranged from life-affirming world views and life practices. Many black people see themselves solely as victims with no capacity to shape and determine their own destiny. Despite powerful anti-racist struggle in this society, expressed in the sixties' civil rights and black power movements, internalized racism manifested by ongoing self-hate and low self-esteem has intensified. Devastating poverty and the rising gaps between black folks

who have gained access to economic privilege and the vast majority who will seemingly remain forever poor make it difficult for individuals to build and sustain community. Kinship ties between black people are more easily threatened and broken now than at other historical moments when even material well-being was harder for black people to gain than it is now. Widespread addiction, pervasive among all classes of black people, is yet another indication of our collective crisis. Black people are indeed wounded by forces of domination. Irrespective of our access to material privilege we are all wounded by white supremacy, racism, sexism, and a capitalist economic system that dooms us collectively to an underclass position. Such wounds do not manifest themselves only in material ways, they effect our psychological well-being. Black people are wounded in our hearts, minds, bodies, and spirits.

Though many of us recognize the depth of our pain and hurt, we do not usually collectively organize in an ongoing manner to find and share ways to heal ourselves. Our literature has helped, however. Progressive black women artists have shown ongoing concern about healing our wounds. Much of the celebrated fiction by black women writers is concerned with identifying our pain and imaginatively constructing maps for healing. Books like *Sassafrass, Cypress and Indigo; The Bluest Eye; The Color Purple; Praisesong for the Widow; Maru; The Salt Eaters;* and many others address the deep, often unnamed psychic wounding that takes place in the daily lives of black folks in this society. This fiction is popular because it speaks to the hurt black folks are grappling with. Indeed, many non-black people also find healing maps in this work they can use in daily life. It has been in my role as a professor,

teaching the work of black writers in general, and black women writers in particular, that I became more fully aware of our contemporary collective suffering. Teaching young black people at one of the most prestigious universities in this society, I was amazed by their lack of self-awareness and understanding, their lack of knowledge of black history and culture, and the profound anxiety and despair that was so pervasive in their lives.

When black female students would come to my office after reading these novels and confess the truth of their lives—that they were terrorized psychologically by low self-esteem; that they were the victims of rape, incest, and domestic violence; that they lived in fear of being unmasked as the inferiors of their white peers; that stress was making their hair fall out; that every other month one of them was attempting suicide; that they were anorexic, bulimic, or drug addicted—I was shocked. Most of these students were coming from materially privileged backgrounds. Yet I saw in their lives the same problems that are so acutely visible among the black poor and underclass, problems that are usually seen by liberals in the larger society as rooted primarily in economics. What the experiences of these young black women indicated, however, was that the problem was not merely economic. This, of course, made sense to me. I had been raised in a world of the black poor and underclass that was still life-affirming. I knew that poverty by itself need not be a condition that promotes such nihilism and despair.

When black female students read Toni Bambara's novel *The Salt Eaters* in my black women writers course, several came to talk with me about their identification with the black woman character Velma, a character who

attempts suicide when the novel opens. Hearing these women describe their sense of estrangement and loneliness, I felt that a support group was needed and helped organize it. There is this passage in *The Salt Eaters* where the black women ancestors, one living, one dead, come together to see about healing Velma. The younger of the two, Minnie Ransom, says to the elder: "What is wrong, Old Wife? What is happening to the daughters of the yam? Seem like they just don't know how to draw up the powers from the deep like before."

I strongly identified with this passage. Knowing that I had been raised among black women and men who were in touch with their healing powers, who had taught me how to "draw up the powers from the deep," I grieved for this new generation who seemed so modern, so sophisticated, and so lost. And I thought we should call our support group "Sisters of the Yam" to honor Bambara's work and the wisdom she offered to us. I also felt the "yam" was a life-sustaining symbol of black kinship and community. Everywhere black women live in the world, we eat yam. It is a symbol of our diasporic connections. Yams provide nourishment for the body as food yet they are also used medicinally—to heal the body.

Our collective hope for the group was that it would be a space where black women could name their pain and find ways of healing. The power of the group to transform one another's lives seemed to be determined by the intensity of each individual's desire to recover, to find a space within and without, where she could sustain the will to be well and create affirming habits of being. *The Salt Eaters* begins with a question, asked by the elder black woman healer. She says to Velma, who has tried to kill herself and

is barely alive, "Are you sure, sweetheart, that you want to be well?" Only an affirmative response makes healing possible. In her introduction to the recently published collection of essays *The Black Women's Health Book: Speaking for Ourselves,* Evelyn White reminds readers of the grim statistics that document the grave health problems facing black women. Significantly, she reports that "more than 50 percent of black women live in a state of emotional distress." This will surprise few black women, who are daily assaulted by institutionalized structures of domination that have as one of their central agendas undermining our capacity to experience well-being.

In the Sisters of the Yam support groups, which continued for years, we found that one important source of healing emerged when we got in touch with all the factors in our lives that were causing particular pain. For black females, and males too, that means learning about the myriad ways racism, sexism, class exploitation, homophobia, and various other structures of domination operate in our daily lives to undermine our capacity to be self-determining. Without knowing what factors have created certain problems in the first place we could not begin to develop meaningful strategies of personal and collective resistance. Black female self-recovery, like all black self-recovery, is an expression of a liberatory political practice. Living as we do in a white-supremacist capitalist patriachal context that can best exploit us when we lack a firm grounding in self and identity (knowledge of who we are and where we have come from), choosing "wellness" is an act of political resistance. Before many of us can effectively sustain engagement in organized resistance struggle, in black liberation movement, we need to undergo a process

of self-recovery that can heal individual wounds that may prevent us from functioning fully.

In *Sisters of the Yam: Black Women and Self-Recovery,* I want to share those strategies for self-recovery that I and other black women have used to heal our lives in Sisters of the Yam support groups and elsewhere. Though I write about the healing process as an individual, the insights shared are collective. They emerge from my lived experience of community and communion with black people. Even though our collective healing as a people must be a collective process, one that includes black men, I speak here directly to black women because I am most familiar with the issues we face.

Often when I tell black folks that I believe the realm of mental health, of psychic well-being, is an important arena for black liberation struggle, they reject the idea that any "therapy"—be it in a self-help program or a professional therapeutic setting—could be a location for political praxis. This should be no surprise. Traditional therapy, mainstream psychoanalytical practices, often do not consider "race" an important issue, and as a result do not adequately address the mental-health dilemmas of black people. Yet these dilemmas are very real. They persist in our daily life and they undermine our capacity to live fully and joyously. They even prevent us from participating in organized collective struggle aimed at ending domination and transforming society. In traditional southern black folk life, there was full recognition that the needs of the spirit had to be addressed if individuals were to be fully self-actualized. In our conventional religious experience we sang songs that posed profound questions like: "Is it well with your soul? Are you free and

made whole?" Psychological problems were not ignored back then. They were treated by the diverse and usually uncertified "healers" who folks knew to take their troubles to. In the years before television, folks talked to one another. Conversation and story-telling were important locations for sharing information about the self, for healing. Let us remember that psychotherapy is often called the "talking cure."

Recently, I and the other guests on a talk show focusing on the crisis in black family life exemplified by domestic violence. We were asked to suggest strategies that would help. I urged that black families talk more with one another, openly and honestly. In his essay "Dying as the Last Stage of Growth," Mwalimu Imara speaks about the importance of open communication:

> We seldom think of conversation as commitment, but it is. I find that expressing what I really feel and telling another person what is actually important to me at the moment is difficult. It requires a commitment on my part to do so, and I sense that this is true for most of us. It is equally difficult to listen. We are usually so full of our own thoughts and responses that we seldom really listen close enough to one another to grasp the real flavor of what the other person is attempting to convey. Creative communication in depth is what allows us to experience a sense of belonging to others. It is the force that limits the destructive potential in our lives and what promotes the growth aspects. Life is a struggle. Coping with a lifetime of change is a struggle, but through a lifetime of change we will experience ourselves as full persons only to the degree that we allow ourselves that commitment to others which keeps us in creative dialogue.

It is important that black people talk to one another, that we talk with friends and allies, for the telling of

our stories enables us to name our pain, our suffering, and to seek healing.

When I opened my tattered copy of *The Salt Eaters* today, I found these words written in pencil on the back cover. They were spoken to me by a student seeking recovery: "Healing occurs through testimony, through gathering together everything available to you and reconciling." This is a book about reconciliation. It is meant to serve as a map, charting a journey that can lead us back to that place dark and deep within us, where we were first known and loved, where the arms that held us hold us still.

Chapter 1

Seeking After Truth

We have to consciously study how to be tender with each other until it becomes a habit because what was native has been stolen from us, the love of Black women for each other. But we can practice being gentle with each other by being gentle with that piece of ourselves that is hardest to hold, by giving more to the brave bruised girlchild within each of us, by expecting a little less from her gargantuan efforts to excel. We can love her in the light as well as in the darkness, quiet her frenzy toward perfection and encourage her attentions toward fulfillment...As we arm ourselves with ourselves and each other, we can stand toe to toe inside that rigorous loving and begin to speak the impossible—or what has always seemed like the impossible—to one another. The first step toward genuine change. Eventually, if we speak the truth to each other, it will become unavoidable to ourselves.

—Audre Lorde, "Eye to Eye," *Sister Outsider*

Healing takes place within us as we speak the truth of our lives. In M. Scott Peck's popular discussion of a new healing psychology in *The Road Less Traveled,* he emphasizes the link between dedication to truth and our capacity to be well. He stresses that: "One of the roots of mental illness is invariably an interlocking system of lies we have

been told and lies we have told ourselves." Commitment to truth-telling is thus the first step in any process of self-recovery. A culture of domination is necessarily a culture where lying is an acceptable social norm. It, in fact, is required. White folks knew that they were lying about African slaves who labored from sun-up to sundown when they then told the world that those same slaves were "lazy." White supremacy has always relied upon a structure of deceit to perpetuate degrading racial stereotypes, myths that black people were inferior, more "animalistic." Within the colonizing process, black people were socialized to believe that survival was possible only if they learned how to deceive. And indeed, this was often the case.

Slaves often told "lies" to white oppressors to keep from being brutally punished or murdered. They learned that the art of hiding behind a false appearance could be useful when dealing with the white master and mistress. Skillful lying could protect one's safety, could help one gain access to greater resources, or make resistance possible. Slave narratives testify that the ability to deceive was a requirement for survival. One collection of slave narratives edited by Gilbert Osofsky is even titled *Puttin' on Ole Massa.* In her slave narrative *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl,* Harriet Jacobs expresses motherly pride that her children learn at an early age that they must keep the secret of her hiding place from oppressive white people as well as untrustworthy black folks. A Jamaican proverb that was often quoted among slaves urged folks to "play fool, to catch wise." This was seen as essential for black survival, even if it required lying and deceit.

Any reader of slave narratives knows that religious black folks expressed anger and rage that they were forced

by oppressive social circumstances to commit the sin of "lying." Slaves expressed righteous indignation that oppressive white people created a dehumanizing social structure where truth-telling could be valued but not practiced and where black people were judged inferior because of their "inability" to be truthful. Caught in a double-bind, on one hand believing in the importance of honesty, but on the other hand knowing that it was not prudent to always speak truthfully to one's oppressors, slaves judiciously withheld information and lied when necessary. Even free black people knew that white supremacist power could so easily be asserted in an oppressive way, that they too practiced the art of hiding behind a false appearance in the interest of survival. In *The Narrative of Lunsford Lane,* published in 1848, Lane stated that even after freedom:

> I had endeavored to conduct myself as not to become obnoxious to the white inhabitants, knowing as I did their power, and their hostility to the colored people...First, I had made no display of the little property or money I possessed, but in every way I wore as much as possible the aspect of slavery. Second, I had never appeared to be even so intelligent as I really was. This all colored in the south, free and slaves, find it particularly necessary for their own comfort and safety to observe.

The realities of daily life in white-supremacist America conveyed to black people in the long years after slavery had ended that it was still not in their interest to forsake this practice of dissimulation. Continued racial oppression, especially when it took the form of lynching and outright murder of black people, made it clear to all black folks that one had to be careful about speaking the truth to whites.

Paul Laurence Dunbar's much quoted poem gives eloquent witness to how conscious black folks were of the way that they had to practice falsehood in daily life:

We wear the mask that grins and lies,
It hides our cheeks and shades our eyes,
This debt we pay to human guile;
With torn and bleeding hearts we smile,
And mouth with myriad subtleties.
Why should the world be over-wise,
In counting all our tears and sighs?
Nay, let them only see us, while
We wear the mask.

The justification for "wearing a mask" is obvious when we consider the circumstances of living in conditions of legal racial apartheid, where black folks had so little recourse with which to address wrongs perpetrated against them by whites. Yet the time has come when we must examine to what extent the practice of dissimulation, of being deceitful, carried over into our social norms with one another. Encouraged to wear the mask to ensure survival in relation to the white world, black folks found themselves using strategies of dissimulation and withholding truth in interpersonal relationships within black communities. This was especially true for gender relations.

Patriarchal politics not only gave black men a bit of an edge over black women, it affirmed that males did not have to answer to females. Hence, it was socially acceptable for all men in patriarchal society (black men were no exception) to lie and deceive to maintain power over women. Just as the slaves had learned from their white masters the art of dissimulation, women learned that they could subvert male power over them by also withholding

truth. The many southern black women who learned to keep a bit of money stashed away somewhere that "he don't know about" were responding to the reality of domestic cruelty and violence and the need to have means to escape. However, the negative impact of these strategies was that truth-telling, honest and open communication, was less and less seen as necessary to the building of positive love relationships.

Even though most black children raised in traditional southern homes are taught the importance of honesty, the lesson is undermined when parents are not honest. Growing up, many of us saw that grown folks did not always practice the same honesty they told us was so important. Or, many times, we would tell the "truth" only to be punished for such talk. And again, since racism was still the crucial factor shaping power relations between black and white people, there was still an emphasis on practicing dissimulation—one that persists in most black people's lives.

Many of the survival strategies that were once useful to black people, like dissimulation, are no longer appropriate to the lives we are living and therefore do us grave harm. Imagine, for example, this scenario: A black woman professor who has never completed her Ph.D. finds that in her daily life most folks she interacts with simply assume that she has this degree. She finds it easier not to explain. And indeed finds that she receives greater respect and recognition when folks see her as doctor so-and-so. Yet, there is a price she must pay for this deception—inner stress, fear of being found out, fear of losing the status she has falsely acquired. Now, one healthy response she could have had when she found that people accorded her greater respect when they assumed she had the degree would have

been to use this information as a catalyst inspiring her to complete unfinished graduate work. We could all give countless examples related to jobs where black folks feel that the decks are stacked against us to begin with because of racism and therefore feel it is okay to lie about skills, experience, etc. Unfortunately such strategies may help one get jobs but the burden of maintaining deception may be so great that it renders individuals psychologically unable to withstand the pressure. Lies hurt. While they may give the teller greater advantage in one arena, they may undermine her well-being in another.

Cultivating the art of dissimulation has also created an over-valuation of "appearance" in black life. So much so that black children are often raised to believe that it is more important how things seem than the way they really are. If illusions are valued more than reality, and black children are taught how to skillfully create them even as they are simultaneously deprived of the means to face reality, they are being socialized to feel comfortable, at ease, only in situations where lying is taking place. They are being taught to exist in a state of denial. These psychic conditions lay the groundwork for mental stress, for mental illness. Dissimulation makes us dysfunctional. Since it encourages us to deny what we genuinely feel and experience, we lose our capacity to know who we really are and what we need and desire. When I can stand before a class of predominantly black students who refuse to believe that conscious decisions and choices are made as to what roles black actors will portray in a given television show, I feel compelled to name that their desire to believe that the images they see emerge from a politically neutral fantasy world of make-believe is disempowering—is a part of a

colonizing process. If they cannot face the way structures of domination are institutionalized, they cannot possibly organize to resist the racism and sexism that informs the white-dominated media's construction of black representation. And, on a more basic level, they lack the capacity to protect themselves from being daily bombarded and assaulted by disenabling imagery. Our mental well-being is dependent on our capacity to face reality. We can only face reality by breaking through denial.

In Alice Walker's novel *The Color Purple,* Celie, the black heroine, only begins to recover from her traumatic experiences of incest/rape, domestic violence, and marital rape when she is able to tell her story, to be open and honest. Reading fictional narratives where black female characters break through silences to speak the truth of their lives, to give testimony, has helped individual black women take the risk to openly share painful experiences. We see examples of such courageous testimony in *The Black Women's Health Book.* Yet many black readers of Alice Walker's fiction were angered by Celie's story. They sought to "punish" Walker by denouncing the work, suggesting it represented a betrayal of blackness. If this is the way folks respond to fiction, we can imagine then how much harder it is for black women to actually speak honestly in daily life about their real traumatic experiences. And yet there is no healing in silence. Collective black healing can take place only when we face reality. As poet Audre Lorde reminds us in "Litany For Survival":

and when we speak we are afraid
our words will not be heard
nor welcomed

but when we are silent
we are still afraid

So it is better to speak
remembering
we were never meant to survive

Collective unmasking is an important act of resistance. If it remains a mark of our oppression that as black people we cannot be dedicated to truth in our lives, without putting ourselves at risk, then it is a mark of our resistance, our commitment to liberation, when we claim the right to speak the truth of our reality anyway.

Many individual black women, particularly those among us involved in feminist movement, consider it important that black females who have been victimized by traumatic events like incest and rape speak openly about their experiences. Yet some are not necessarily committed to a philosophy of well-being dedicated to truth. While these individuals may applaud a black woman who publicly names an injury done to her by a man, they may fail to support her if she is committed to speaking truthfully in other areas of her daily life. These women may punish another black woman for speaking truthfully, or critique her by suggesting that she does not possess certain social graces. This is especially true among professional classes of black women who buy into notions of social etiquette informed by bourgeois values committed to keeping the public and the private separate. Indeed, black females from working-class backgrounds who have been raised to speak openly and honestly may find those traits a social handicap when dealing in bourgeois circles. They will be encouraged, usually by forms of social exclusion (which serve as punishment), to change their ways. It is not easy

for a black female to be dedicated to truth. And yet the willingness to be honest is essential for our well-being. Dissimulation may make one more successful, but it also creates life-threatening stress.

Among poor and working-class black people the impetus to dissimulate is usually connected with the desire to cover up realities that are regarded as "shameful." Many of us were raised to be believe that we should never speak publicly about our private lives, because the public world was powerful enough to use such information against us. For poor people, especially those receiving any form of government aid, this might mean loss of material resources or that one's children could be taken away. Yet, again, we hold onto these strategies even when they are not connected to our survival and undermine our well-being. Telling the truth about one's life is not simply about naming the "bad" things, exposing horrors. It is also about being able to speak openly and honestly about feelings, about a variety of experiences. It is fundamentally not about withholding information so as to exercise power over others.

A few weeks ago, I was talking with one of my sisters about a very obvious lie that someone in our family had told to me. Emotionally upset, I was crying and saying, "I could deal with anything this family does if folks would just tell the truth. It's the lying that makes me feel crazy." We had a deep discussion about telling the truth, wherein she confessed that she tells a lot of lies. I was shocked, since I had always seen her as an honest person. And I wanted to know why. She admitted that it started with trying to gain a financial edge in her domestic life, but then she found herself just lying about little things even when

it was not necessary. Analyzing this, we decided that the ability to withhold information, even it was something very trivial, gave her a feeling of power. We talked about the importance of learning that this feeling is "illusory" for it does not correspond with actual power to effect changes in one's daily social reality and is thus ultimately disenabling. Parents who lie do nothing to teach children the importance of speaking the truth.

For many poor black people, learning to be honest must take place in a situation where one also learns to confront the question of shame. The dominant culture acts as though the very experience of poverty is shameful. So how then can the poor speak about the conditions of their lives openly and honestly. Those of us raised in traditional southern black homes were taught to critique the notion of "shame" when it was evoked to strip us of dignity and integrity. We were taught to believe that there was nothing shameful about being poor, that richness of life could not ultimately be determined by our access to material goods. Black women working as maids in white homes had first-hand experience to prove money did not guarantee happiness, well-being, or integrity.

It is one of the tragic ironies of contemporary life that the privileged classes have convinced the poor and underclass that they must hide and deny the realities of their lives while the priveleged go public, in therapy, sharing all that they might have repressed out of shame, in order to try and heal their wounds. In the introduction to my third book, *Talking Back,* I wrote about the importance of speaking openly and honestly about *our* lives. I wrote about the negative "flak" I get from folks for being honest. Or lately, in bourgeois work settings, it is said about me

that I do not keep confidences, when what is really happening is that I politically choose to resist being put in the position of keeping the secrets of the powerful, or of being welcomed into social circles of deceit. I had written years ago that "even folks who talk about ending domination seem to be afraid to break down the barriers separating public and private" by truth-telling. That still seems to be the case. Hence, it must be remembered that to be open and honest in a culture of domination, a culture that relies on lying, is a courageous gesture. Within white-supremacist capitalist patriarchal culture, black people are not supposed to be "well." This culture makes wellness a white luxury. To choose against that culture, to choose wellness, we must be dedicated to truth.

By giving up the illusory power that comes from lying and manipulation and opting instead for the personal power and dignity that comes from being honest, black women can begin to eliminate life-threatening pain from our lives. As I wrote in *Talking Back:*

> There are some folks for whom openness is not about the luxury of "will I choose to share this or tell that," but rather, "will I survive—will I make it through—will I stay alive?" And openness is about how to be well and telling the truth is about how to put the broken bits and pieces of the heart back together again. It is about being whole, being wholehearted.

Many black women in the United States are brokenhearted. They walk around in daily life carrying so much hurt, feeling wasted, yet pretending in every area of their life that everything is under control. It hurts to pretend. It hurts to live with lies. The time has come for black women to attend to that hurt. M. Scott Peck ends his

chapter "Withholding Truth" by reminding us that folks who are honest and open can feel free:

> They are not burdened by any need to hide. They do not have to slink around in the shadows. They do not have to construct new lies to hide old ones. They need waste no effort covering tracks or maintaining disguises...By their openness, people dedicated to the truth live in the open, and through the exercise of their courage to live in the open, they become free from fear.

In black life, the church has been one of the few places that has encouraged black folks to live truthful lives. Yet hypocrisy has come to be a central characteristic of the contemporary black church. The old black folks took the Biblical passage that declares "the truth will set you free" to heart. And, while the church might have changed, these words are still true. Their healing power can be felt in black women's lives if we dare to look at ourselves, our lives, our experiences and then, without shame, courageously name what we see.

Chapter 2

Tongues of Fire
Learning Critical Affirmation

Writing about truth-telling in relationship to black experience is difficult. Making connections between the psychological strategies black folks have historically used to make life bearable in an oppressive/exploitive social context and then calling attention to the way these strategies may be disenabling now when we use them in daily life, particularly in intimate relationships, can too easily sound academic. I look back on the previous chapter and it does not read with the ease that I have become accustomed to in self-help books. Maybe this is why the self-help books we read rarely talk about political realities. I want to shift the tone now, however, and speak more concretely about how we confront issues of openness and honesty. Oftentimes, black folks find it easier to "tell it like it is" when we are angry, pissed, and desire to use "the truth" as a weapon to wound others. In such cases, even though a speaker may be open and honest, their primary agenda may be to assert power over another person and hence use the practice of truth-telling to assault someone else's psyche. That is why this chapter attempts to distinguish

between the harsh critiques we give one another, which may contain "truth," and liberating truth-telling—they are not the same.

Raised in a family of sharp-tongued women, who were known to raise their voices, to argue and cuss, I and my five sisters learned early on how "telling it like is" could be used as a weapon of power to humiliate and shame someone. Here is an example from my experience. Growing up I was very skinny and saw this as a sign of extreme unattractiveness. Relentlessly teased by my sisters and my brother (who often told elaborate stories that entertained everyone about how often he had witnessed the wind blowing me away and had to chase after me and hold onto my feet to keep from losing me), my family completely reinforced the sense that to be skinny was to be ugly and a cause for shame. Now, whenever my family described me as skinny, they were being honest. Yet, what was the intent behind the honesty? Usually, it was to make me the object of ridicule and mockery. Though often the object of unkind "reading" that humiliated and shamed, I learned to protect myself by also developing the skill to name just that bit of information about someone that would expose them and make them feel vulnerable. What we all participated in was a practice of verbal assault, truth-telling as a weapon. In contemporary black culture this practice often takes the form of calling somebody out, that is "reading" them, or in a milder form, "dissin" them. Having someone critically analyze you and expose aspects of your reality you might like to keep hidden or deny, can be constructive and even pleasurable; however, it usually takes place in a context where the intent is to hurt or wound.

Exploring the way we as black women use this form of "telling it like is" will help some of us, who may see ourselves as open and honest, examine whether we are really dedicated to truth-telling when we are exposing something about someone else. Harsh criticism, with a truth-telling component, is often a major characteristic of black mother-and-daughter relationships. Since many black women were and still are raised in households where most of the love and affection we receive comes from black women elders—mothers, aunts, and grandmothers—who may also use criticism in a verbally abusive way, we may come to see such a practice as a caring gesture. And even though it wounds, we may imagine this hurting takes place for our own good.

Let me give an example that is fresh in my memory because it was a story told to me just yesterday by T., a young black woman. Attending a girlfriend's college graduation, she went out to eat with her friend's family. During dinner, the mother kept calling attention to the fact that her daughter needed to lose weight. Now it should be obvious that the public setting was not an appropriate place for such a dialogue. And why on a special day, a time when the daughter's achievements should be focused on and celebrated, does the mother call attention to perceived flaws or failings? When T. tried to intervene on her friend's behalf and assert that she thought she looked fine, she was kicked under the table by her friend and made to hush. Probably, like many of us, the friend is so accustomed to her mother choosing inappropriate moments to offer criticism, or always being critical, that she adjusts by simply not responding. For some of us, the endless negative critiques we have received from our mothers have been

very disenabling. Yet, having learned how to use criticism with truth content to wound, we may employ the same practices. And like mothers who do this, when called on it, we may fall back on insisting that we are "just being honest." Here honesty is evoked to cover up abusive practices and hurting intent. This is not the kind of honesty that is healing. And it is vitally important for black female well-being that we can distinguish it from a commitment to truth-telling.

Often black females are raised in households where we are told by mothers who constantly give disparaging critiques, "I would be less than a mother if I did not tell you the truth." When trying to analyze the sources of this faulty logic, I trace it back, once again, to the survival strategies black folks developed to adjust to living in a white-supremacist context. The reality of racial apartheid was such that most black folks knew that they could never really trust that they would be "safe" in that white-dominated world outside the home or the all-black neighborhood. To gain a sense that they had some control over this situation, they set standards for behavior that were seen as appropriate safeguards. When racial integration happened, black folks did not immediately disregard these strategies, they adjusted them. One adjustment was the attempt to second-guess what the critical white world might say to disparage, ridicule, or mock and to prevent that from happening through self-critique and changing one's behavior accordingly. We were raised hearing stories about mothers punishing black children who were given no clear sense of what they had done that was considered wrong or inappropriate, because they felt that the child might assert themselves in ways outside the home that

might lead white people to abuse and punish them. Setting up a system of internal checks required not only vigilant self-scrutiny, but also a willingness to place oneself in the mindset of the oppressor. This meant that black people were not focusing attention on constructing ways to critically affirm ourselves. Instead they worked at developing strategies to avoid punishment. Since no in-depth studies have been done looking at attempts on the part of black people to see ourselves through the negative eyes of the colonizer/oppressor, we can only speculate that such practices helped create a social climate where black folks could be harshly critical of one another. Living in a sexist society, where mothers are often blamed for any problem that arises with children, it makes sense that black mothers have often felt the need to assert control over their children in ways that are oppressive and dominating. How else can they "prove" to outside onlookers that they are good parents? The desire, of course, is to be beyond reproach.

Fierce parental critique and the threat of punishment is a strategy many black women use to assert their authority with children. One has only to observe black women parenting young children in public places. Often the children are spoken to harshly—bring your ass over here like I told you, sit your black ass down and shut up—not because the mother is angry at the children but because she desires them to behave "appropriately" in public settings. She wants to be perceived as a good parent. Notice though that being a good parent is made synonymous with the extent to which one is able to exercise control over a child's behavior. We would do well to connect this obsession with control to the strategies of domination white

people have used, and still use, to maintain authority over us. We need to better understand how black folks who feel relatively powerless to control their destiny exercise negative power over one another in hierarchical settings.

The parent-child relationship in a culture of domination like this one is based on the assumption that the adult has the right to rule the child. It is a model of parenting that mirrors the master-slave relationship. Black parents' obsession with exercising control over children, making certain that they are "obedient" is an expression of this distorted view of family relations. The parents' desire to "care" for the child is placed in competition with the perceived need to exercise control. This is graphically illustrated in Audre Lorde's autobiographical work *Zami.* Descriptions of her childhood here offer glimpses of that type of strict parenting many black parents felt was needed to prepare black children for life in a hostile white society. Not understanding the way racism works as a child, the young Audre decides to run for sixth-grade class president. She tells the news to her mother only to be greeted with these furious words:

> What in hell are you doing getting yourself involved with so much foolishness? You don't have better sense in your head than that? What-the-france do you need with election? We sent you to school to work, not to prance about with president-this election-that. Get down the rice, girl, and stop talking your foolishness.

When Audre participates in the election anyway and comes home crying and emotionally crushed because she did not win, her mother responds with rage, striking a blow that Lorde remembers "caught me full on the side of my head." Then her mother says:

> See, the bird forgets, but the trap doesn't! I warned you! What you think you doing coming into this house wailing about election? If I told you once I have told you a hundred times, don't chase yourself behind these people, haven't I? What kind of ninny raise up here to think those good-for-nothing white piss-jets would pass over some little jacabat girl to select you anything?

And the blows continued. Though Lorde's background is West Indian, northern, and urban, those of us growing up in the south confronted the same craziness in our parents. I can remember when my sister V. wanted to play tennis after the schools were racially integrated. Up until then our black schools did not have tennis teams. Our parents could not afford the necessary equipment, however, but rather than explain this, they criticized V. and made it seem that she had a problem for wanting to play this game. Often after such strange incidents, after maternal rage had subsided, we might be given a bit of tenderness, behavior that further reinforced the notion that somehow this fierce, humiliating critique was for our own good. Again these negative parental strategies were employed to prepare black children for entering a white-dominated society that our parents knew would not treat us well. They thought that by making us "tough," teaching us to endure pain with a stiff upper lip, they were ensuring our survival.

Knowing the concern and care that informs such behavior, and understanding it better when we grow older, often leads black women in adult life to imagine that our "survival" and the successes we have gained are indeed due to our having been forced to confront negative critique and punishment. Consequently it is often difficult

for black women to admit that dominating mothers who used a constant barrage of negative verbal abuse to "whip us into shape" were not acting in a caring manner, even if they acted out of positive intent. When I "got grown" and had to cope with running my own household—keeping it clean, buying necessities, paying the bills—I began to look with awe at Mama, wondering how she found the time to take care of seven children, clean, shop, and cook three meals a day with very little help from our patriarchal father. Understanding these hardships made the constant harsh humiliating way she often spoke to us make sense. I find it easy to forgive that harshness, but I now can also honestly name that it was hurting, that it did not make me or my siblings feel securely loved. Indeed, I always felt that not behaving appropriately meant that one risked wrath and punishment, and more frighteningly, the loss of love.

It is important for black women engaged in a process of self-recovery to examine the way in which harsh critique was used to "check" and police our behavior so that we can examine the extent to which we relate similarly to others. When my siblings and I were children, we vowed that we would not yell at our kids or say mean things the way Mama and Daddy did. Yet, some of us have, unwittingly, broken that vow. Visiting one of my sisters and her family for the first time, I was shocked at the harsh negative manner she used when speaking to her children. It was so much like our childhood, only there was one difference, her children used the same "nasty" tone of voice when speaking to each other. When I gently called her on it and voiced my concern, she expressed surprise. Working all day and coming home to more work, she had not really

noticed how she and the kids were talking to one another. To make my honest critique a constructive, caring one, I suggested that we do role playing with the kids after dinner—talking the way they talk to one another, then showing how it could be done differently. Rather than saying: "Sit your ass down. I ain't gon tell you no more," we practiced saying politely but firmly: "Would you please stop doing that and sit down?" At first the kids made fun of their Aunt Glo and her stories about "noise pollution" and how the way we talk to one another can hurt our hearts and ears, but we could all see and feel the difference. Critical affirmation emerges only when we are willing to risk constructive confrontation and challenge. What my sister found with her children was that if she spoke in a completely harsh humiliating manner she might indeed get a quicker response than when she made declarations with caring tones, but the effect of the latter was so much better. She improved the family well-being even though it required greater concentration and a little more time to frame responses in a caring way.

To heal our wounds we must be able to critically examine our behavior and change. For years I was a sharp-tongued woman who often inappropriately lashed out. I have increasingly learned to distinguish between "reading" and truth-telling. Watching my behavior (actually jotting down on paper how many negative critical comments I made in a day) helped me to change my behavior. Most black women know what it is like to bear the brunt of brutal tongue-lashings. Most of us have been told the "truth" about ourselves in ways that have been hurtful and humiliating. Yet, even so, many of us continue to see harsh critique as a means to strengthen character.

We need to know that constructive critical affirmation is just as effective a strategy for building character, if not more so. We find this out through an ongoing practice of critical affirmation. Often the harsh abusively critical voice-of-authority that we heard in childhood enters us. Then we no longer have to be in the presence of a dominating authority figure to hear that voice, for it speaks to us from within. In self-healing, black women can identify that voice within ourselves and begin to replace it with a gentle, compassionate, caring voice. When we see the positive results in our lives, we are then able to extend the generosity we give ourselves to others. Having silenced the negative voice within, and replaced it with loving caring criticism, it is also important for black women to practice speaking in a loving and caring manner about what we appreciate about one another. For such an action makes it evident to all observers of our social reality that black women deserve care, respect, and ongoing affirmation.

Chapter 3

Work Makes Life Sweet

"Work makes life sweet!" I often heard this phrase growing up, mainly from old black folks who did not have jobs in the traditional sense of the word. They were usually self-employed, living off the land, selling fishing worms, picking up an odd job here and there. They were people who had a passion for work. They took pride in a job done well. My Aunt Margaret took in ironing. Folks brought her clothes from miles around because she was such an expert. That was in the days when using starch was common and she knew how to do an excellent job. Watching her iron with skill and grace was like watching a ballerina dance. Like all the other black girls raised in the fifties that I knew, it was clear to me that I would be a working woman. Even though our mother stayed home, raising her seven children, we saw her constantly at work, washing, ironing, cleaning, and cooking (she is an incredible cook). And she never allowed her six girls to imagine we would not be working women. No, she let us know that we would work and be proud to work.

The vast majority of black women in the United States know in girlhood that we will be workers. Despite