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I Never Wanted This: Lockdown Reckonings

Lockdown. This is not a word or a concept that we willingly embrace or seek out, conjuring images and emotions that signal entrapment and loss of freedom. We often pursue “retreats” – a weekend of camping or an organized spirituality conference that removes us from distractions and habitual routines – but even as we retreat, we have the illusion of choice-fulness and freedom. In retreat there is a sense of movement. Movement *towards* the healing spaces of introspection in which we assess our purposes and priorities. Lockdown offers no such promises.

March 25, 2020, Governor Walz of Minnesota announced a state-wide “stay at home” order to slow the spread of COVID-19, “The State of Minnesota and our private partners are doing everything we can to keep you safe, but we need your help. Minnesotans, stay home. Let’s flatten the curve and make sure we keep our family, our friends and our neighbors safe.” Some followed the order willingly with hopes of renewing familial bonds, others protested loudly about infringement on their freedoms, still others had no homes to which they could retreat. The streets became quiet and still with the feel of a ghost town aside from the tent encampments that multiplied in greenspaces along highways and in parks.

Shortly into the lockdown my former student, Mia, emailed me: “Can we Facetime?” She had lost her job and had to move into her parents’ home along with her younger brother. She was losing her mind trapped in a house with a mother bent on comparing her children to determine who is the “best” and an enabling father. Mia always comes up short as the queer “other” in her family. Her daily refuge had been the dog park where she took her husky to run, but otherwise was stuck in her childhood bedroom, sinking into depression as her world shrank. “Can you recommend strategies for living with a parent as an adult?” she asked. I had moved my 95-year-old father up to Minnesota from Southern Ohio two years before COVID after a fall that left him unable to live independently. I had no offerings for Mia other than empathy. Learning to live with and care for an elderly parent who had not raised me had been an enormous challenge. By the end of our conversation Mia’s spirit seemed a little lighter. Three days later, we Facetimed again.

Her father had texted her the night before: “If you cannot respect your mother, you will need to find someplace else to live.” Tears of hurt and rage streamed down her face as she told me the story: “I had a fight with my mom. She says I’m putting the whole family at risk by taking Olivia on walks, but I can’t be trapped in here all day long. And he has no guts. He is literally downstairs and I’m upstairs and he texted me this at 11:00 last night!” I offered words of support and a place in my house, but it did little to help with the despair of being threatened by her own kin—in the context of a pandemic, under the edict of a government shelter-in-place order—to be put out on the street.

The news was not telling these stories. There were stories about families working on home projects together, learning to cook together, or reviving family game nights. There were some stories of how the kids were driving the adults crazy. One interviewee described his child jumping up and down on a small trampoline for hours in front of the TV while he tried to get his work done at the dining room table. There were some stories of husbands and wives just learning how to actually **be** in the house together for extended periods of time. But in those first weeks of the lockdown, there were few stories of those who found themselves doubly entrapped: trapped by the virus and trapped in families with patterns of abuse, addiction, and mental illness.

I had taken some solace in my initial conversation with Mia, partly because my father accepts my queerness and I don’t have to fight that battle, and partly because of shared experiences as adults finding ourselves living with parents. Mia and I joked about how we tiptoe into the kitchen when we are hungry, finding ourselves in roles where we are literally “sneaking” around the house like teenagers. Being 20+ years older than Mia and in the position of caretaker for my father, I would not be “thrown out,” but she and I were feeling similar entrapments within our families.

A heavy drinker since his time in the battlefields of World War II, my father is frail in body but willed to life through the promise of five o’clock: the acceptable time to drink his first shot of Scotch. Before COVID, I had settled into a routine to deal with his evening slide from sloppy slurred speech and teetering movements to eventual blackout, his “accidents,” his morning-after hangovers, and the start of the whole process again at 3:30 when his “jonesing” started. But my routine was more of an avoidance pattern: get out of the house early in the morning

before he stirred and wait until he had moved through his morning recovery, return midday, escape again before the clock struck five. Then COVID arrived. Lockdown was instituted. The life of this 95-year-old man with heart failure and high blood pressure was in my hands. The life of this man whose habits had caused me to seek refuge from my own home now depended on lockdown in that home with him.

Contained pressure either explodes or implodes. Three weeks into the lockdown, entrapment with an elderly alcoholic parent began to feel permanent and eternal. Waking up early one Sunday morning, I picked up my journal and imploded, "I never wanted this," I began. The writing quickly shifted to second person as I found myself literally "beside myself," writing as if in conversation with someone whose life I no longer recognized as my own:

You never wanted to live with an alcoholic. Never wanted to live with a man with whom you share blood, but little history. The filth of living with an alcoholic is the worst—it sticks to your skin and no amount of scrubbing can make you feel clean from the messes he makes with food spilled everywhere, or not being able to get to the toilet in time, or just the disregard for general rules of propriety when he spits on the floor.

The distance of second person seems like an unconscious attempt to narrate the events that led to the moment of hopelessness, trying to piece together the slow accommodation of his addiction so that I could find my way back to the self I used to be:

You accepted all the accidents and blackouts and slowly folded them into your life—the broken lightbulbs, crushed because he couldn't find the off switch on the lamp; the microwave set on fire when he mistakenly punched in a 20-minute cook-time for his potato and then passed out; the cuts and bruises he could not remember inflicting from his falls; the doctor visits to stitch up his face; and the dinners. The dinners were the worst: sitting next to him at the table as he passed out, trying to quickly finish your meal as his head drooped forward, hanging precariously over his nearly full plate of food.

He had come into my life 16 years earlier when he found himself alone after his wife died prematurely. I had felt my own magnitude of loneliness after my mother, his first wife, rejected me and proclaimed me "dead" when I came out as a teenager. Just as I began my career as a professor in 2004, empathy called me to accept him into a life I had

forged out of nearly nothing the day I found all my belongings stacked outside my childhood home.

Sixteen years of panicked drunk calls from him in the evening when he still lived at home in Cincinnati and 16 years of summer and holiday visits to Minnesota with his evening ritual slide into blackout had slowly erased other parts of him – the architect who delights in drawing up plans for home projects, the woodworker who sees a messy drawer and designs and builds an organizer for it, the lover of language who has studied Spanish for over a decade to keep his mind engaged, the talker who would rather sit with younger people chatting about ideas than have coffee with his peers at the Y who are “weird” because “all they talk about is their ailments.” The accommodation came at the cost of me solidifying and totalizing him into one aspect of who he is: addict and dirty drunk. The implosion of pent-up rage and disgust found its way to the page that Sunday morning as I journaled about an evening nine years earlier when he was visiting over the summer:

Forty-plus years old and you had just begun to set boundaries, refusing to witness or participate in the evening slide to blackout. You spent the days with him, but made a commitment to leave the house by 5:00, returning only after he'd gone to bed. On this evening, you were at Tina's house, decompressing, having a beer, the night sky was settling in. At 9:01 the calls started coming in on your cell phone (you had told him you'd be back home sometime around 9). One call, two calls, three calls in 10 minutes. “I'm not going to engage with the drunk panic,” you told Tina and put the phone on silent. Fifteen minutes later, you made your way home, hoping he would be passed out. Exiting your garage and heading down the sidewalk to your back door, you could see him peering out the window. You steel yourself for the drama.

The questions accost you before you can get a key in the door, “Where were you?! I was worried sick?! I called you and you didn't answer and I didn't know where you were!” You wrap yourself in a tone of indifference, “I told you I was at Tina's. You know where she lives, just a mile away.” But your refusal to engage only escalates his agitation. As you pour yourself a bowl of cereal, he continues to rant about how he had waited and waited and was worried out of his mind. Following you to the table, still ranting, he sat in the adjacent chair and then the sobbing started.

These visits started nearly a decade ago when his wife, Carol, died. He drove from Cincinnati and stayed two weeks, then three weeks, then a month. You didn't know how to set boundaries. You didn't know how to say, "No." Initially it was empathy that drove you—you didn't want him to feel alone in the world, you didn't want the highlight of his week to be the fact that the grocery clerk remembered him from the previous week. But you had no more empathy, no more tolerance for the panicked drunk calls that had become a regular pattern. You tried to ignore him as you ate your cereal in your cloak of indifference. His head dropped into his hands and his sobs increased to a tantrum, "I want my Carol. I want my Carol, I want my Carol, I want my Carol...." he chanted. And then came the kicker, "I never wanted you. I would give you up if I can just have my Carol." Hate coursed into your heart like molten lava, but you felt cold and hard in your mind: "I wish you had her too," you thought to yourself. "I never wanted this."

You had a recurring dream about Carol since her death in 2004. You were at his house in Cincinnati, and she would saunter out from their bedroom closet. Or you would be cooking something in the kitchen for him and she would walk in the back door. She was enraged that you were in her space. You were enraged that she had left you with the responsibility of him. The question you asked was always the same, "**Where** have you been?" exasperated and relieved in the same breath—like she had just stepped out to the grocery or the mall and hadn't returned till now. But it had been two years, and then five, then ten. Sixteen years later and the dream doesn't happen so often, but now that he lives with you, now that you are in lockdown with him, you wonder if Carol died on purpose. Wonder if his drinking was simply more than she bargained for. Not the established and upstanding hospital architect she married when she was a secretary at his firm, not a man in control of his life, but a man who became an "un-man" every evening at 5:00, shirttail hanging out, pants drooping closer to his knees than his waist, head hanging over his plate of food. You wonder if she said those words too, "I never wanted this."

But how did you get here? **You** built this life; how did you get here? You willingly moved him up to Minnesota to live with you after he

fell during a blackout and landed in the hospital. You think back to the moment when you first saw him in his hospital bed: purple-blue bruised face with a unicorn sized lump in the middle of his brow where he hit the coffee table on the way down. Feeding tube through his nose. Unable to walk, unable to shower or toilet himself. You could have walked away, but seeing his helplessness, his raw fear broke open your heart again. You could not imagine this man, swaddled in a diaper, unable to eat or drink on his own, drunk, or drinking. You advocated for the tests and the physical therapy and for the very best, most aggressive rehab. You sat in classes with him while he learned how to walk again, how to eat again. You moved him to a temporary nursing home so that you could finish the semester of teaching and he could continue with daily rehab so that he would get stronger.

Somewhere in your imagination, you must have hoped that the fall (caused by the drinking) and two months of being sober while in hospital and rehab would set the tone for his new life in Minnesota with you. But you were delusional in those hopes. When you returned to Cincinnati to retrieve him from the nursing home, you remember the stone that hit your stomach when you saw him pack the last thing into his suitcase: a nearly empty bottle of Scotch pulled from underneath the mattress. Incredulous, "Where did you get the Scotch?" "Dick got it for me," he said with giddiness, like it was a gesture of kindness from his brother rather than the nailing-closed of a door for you. Just as a needle pierces the skin, your fantasy was punctured, and a familiar dread started to course through you.

As I write, the hopelessness takes me to a place where I am more and more beside myself in that second person "you." Feeling trapped in a life that no longer feels like mine, I start to careen down the road of self-blame:

You should have known. You did this to yourself. You are gone, you've given yourself over to this life with this man who will only need more and more care, with this man who will get black-out drunk every night until the day that he finally expires. That's when you hear the goddamn locomotive.

And it's not slow or gradual, it's horn thunders in your ears and all you want to do is surrender. Lie down on the tracks and let it overtake your body, surrender the physical so mental suffering will

stop. You have been running from the same locomotive for as long as you can remember. It's the backdrop sound in every memory, in every "stage" of your life—that low hum of the distant train rumbling over tracks, headed your way. But right now, in this "shelter-in-place" order, it's on top of you, like the time you were walking with your high school friends along the tracks near the campground. Bored. Looking for excitement. You wanted to see if a train would crush a penny into a perfect copper pancake. But when the train finally approached, its force blew you and your friends into the ditch like house centipedes scuttling for cover when you flip on the basement light.

Nobody really talks about the somatic level of living with an alcoholic—the way the dread and the filth course through your body. This is your "now"—waking up day after day after day with this man who lives each day for the promise of 5:00, who you said you would take care of, for whom you sometimes feel empathy for but mostly feel disgust. You are totally spent and are facing your worst demon: the death-wish has always walked hand-in-hand with hopelessness. For the past few weeks, you have been trying to just do "the thing you do" when things get hard: put one foot in front of the other, then repeat. Repeat. Repeat. Just get through this moment because you know it won't last. You have tried to use your rational brain: It's a feeling. Feelings have a short lifespan if we don't fuel them. Willpower. Willpower has gotten you through in the past: get up, feed the dog, stretch out the sore back, have some tea, walk the dog, hear the birds, get on the bike. Do. Do. Do. Do. Just keep doing until the feeling releases its grip on you. But it's been weeks now in lockdown. Death feels like the only escape: either his or yours. The locomotive is relentless in your head—the weight and sound colonizing your brain and you are weighing out your options: "Do I keep doing this—one foot in front of the other, or do I just finally lay myself down like that perfect copper penny, surrender and let that locomotive finally roll over me?"

Writing took me further and further into a state of implosion, just as Mia had imploded a few weeks earlier. I had nothing more to give, no more empathy, no more kindness. Not for him. Not for me. No more desire to keep doing "that thing": putting one foot in front of the other. A future stretched before me where 16 years would become 18 and then 20. Hopelessness had settled into my skin and bones. It was a moment of

reckoning, the very bottom of “I never wanted this.” But I did do that thing: I leashed up the dog, got out of the house, and roamed the empty streets trying to release the demon that tells me death is the only relief from suffering.

The stillness and quiet of the streets allowed for a strange echo in my refrain, “I never wanted this.” Surely my stepmother never wanted this. I imagined my father 30 years before their marriage in February of 1943: pulled out of his first year in college by the draft, sent to Texas for basic training, transported to New York City, and then crammed into a ship with thousands of other newly minted soldiers headed for France. There are just two stories he likes to tell of the war. One story is about how, at all of 120 pounds, the smallest in his unit, he nearly fell off a tank while riding on the outside for fresh air and his 200-pound buddy grabbed him by the shirt-collar to rescue him. The second story is told with that odd mix of humor and terror of a veteran. They were slowly advancing on the Germans and he had dug a foxhole. A German tank entered the field, rolled over him, and stopped. The story always ends the same way: “That’s the day I got God,” he’d say wryly.

Only once has he ever referenced his drinking as a problem. We were in my back yard. He was lit, chatting with my friends while I tended the grill. “I ought to **sue** the U.S. government,” he proclaimed, pointing to his glass of Scotch. “They are the ones who gave me this stuff.” The conversation quickly moved on to facts and dates about the war and his life after it occupying a small German town: the young boy who followed him around and taught him German; the Saturday evening dances where the soldiers and townspeople gathered. Imagining him as a young person with dreams and aspirations, I thought to myself: I bet he never wanted this either. As I walked the quiet streets during lockdown trying to silence the locomotive in my brain, that refrain – I never wanted this – started to sound more like a chorus than my solitary and desperate last grasp for relief from enforced isolation and entrapment. Nobody says to themselves, “Gee, I want to grow up and be an alcoholic,” or “I hope I marry an addict,” or “I sure hope my parents are alcoholics.” Nobody **wants** this, just like nobody **wants** to be in lockdown.

Hearing the chorus of that refrain pulled me out of the downward spiral and gave me just enough breathing space to begin again. Journaling about my history in second person most definitely **did not**

offer healing. It took me deeper and deeper into the implosion. But laying that history on the page from the distance of second person **did** allow me to directly confront hopelessness. And that offered, in an ironic way, a path to deal with the pain of hopelessness. I hold fast to my belief that we all have agency and self-determination (even if limited and constrained by larger forces). There are still countless days when I wish, just **wish**, that my dad had made different choices, had used his agency and, instead of blaming the government, had gotten help. But this reckoning was not about his choices or his life. It was about mine. Decades of working through childhood trauma and wrestling with the demon of suicidal ideation had taught me that self-determination rests on a foundation of how I deal with pain and agency begins with figuring out what I actually have control over so that I can focus my energy there.

My despair took me to deepen my longtime practice in sitting meditation and to my bookshelves. No title spoke more to the early experience of the pandemic lockdown and my personal moment of implosion than Pema Chödrön's *When Things Fall Apart*. In her teachings that explore the wisdom of Buddhism in dealing with fear, pain, and the chaos of uncertainty, she suggests that getting the "knack of hopelessness" marks the beginning of a spiritual path where fear and aversion to groundlessness don't rule our world. "We're all addicted to hope," writes Chödrön, "hope that the doubt and mystery will go away. This addiction has a painful effect on society: a society based on lots of people addicted to getting ground under their feet is not a very compassionate place."¹ She offers the Tibetan word, *ye tang che*, which she describes as totally and completely exhausted. It is a state or experience of hopelessness. "Without giving up hope – that there's somewhere better to be, that there's someone better to be," she writes, "we will never relax with where we are or who we are."² Giving up hope may seem nihilistic, particularly in the context of a pandemic, but Chödrön's critique points us to how hope is often constructed around ego, around wanting things to go a certain way, and seeking a kind of security where pain can be exterminated:

To think that we can finally get it all together is unrealistic. To seek for some lasting security is futile. To undo our very ancient

¹ Chödrön, Pema. *When Things Fall Apart*. Boston: Shambhala Publications, 1997, p. 40.

² Chödrön, *Things Fall Apart*, p. 38.

and very stuck habitual patterns of mind requires that we begin to turn around some of our most basic assumptions. Believing in a solid, separate self, continuing to seek pleasure and avoid pain, thinking that someone “out there” is to blame for our pain – one has to get totally fed up with these ways of thinking. One has to give up hope that this way of thinking will bring us satisfaction. Suffering begins to dissolve when we can question the belief or the hope that there’s anywhere to hide.³

Phrases like “some day,” “if only” and, of course, “I never wanted this” are indicators of this kind of hope because they are about attempting to get out from under suffering rather than accepting that pain is a part of life.

Chödrön’s words helped me see the workings of my ego in my moment of implosion (compounded by childhood trauma, the circumstances of my family, and the context of the pandemic). Letting go of hope and leaning into the kind of hopelessness for which Chödrön advocates is distinct from the hopelessness embodied in giving up on life, which is often a condition of deep disconnection from self and others. *Ye tang che*, or delusional hope, provides motivation to embrace the complicated, messy, and uncertain nature of living. When we give up hope (driven by ego and the need for certainty), we move away from the tacit assumption that suffering is a result of some wrong turn we made or some person who has stepped in the path of our joy or, in the case of COVID, has locked us into narrower and narrower spaces. Ego-driven hope gives us an illusion of agency through blame (ourselves, others, or some external force). Though counterintuitive, there is agency in Chödrön’s hopelessness because we begin to let go of ways of thinking that keep us from our inability to work with (and in) uncertainty and ambiguity.

The experience of entrapment in a house with an elderly, alcoholic parent in the context of a month-long shut-down of social outlets that might otherwise have kept me in an avoidance pattern forced me to confront my own delusional hopes: that I could be a caretaker and live with sustained compassion and at the same time have some sort of “solid, separate self” that was not bound up and affected by my relationship to an increasingly needy elderly parent; that it was him who

³ Chödrön, *Things Fall Apart*, p. 39.

had gotten in the way of my joy, my life; and that if I just stomped my feet hard enough or wrote “I never wanted this” enough times, my ego would win out and I could avoid going to the deeper places that were the real obstacles to living life fully. In effect, my journaling was a tantrum, perhaps similar to the one he had years earlier sobbing at my dining table longing for “his Carol.” Neither of us got what we wanted.

It was a time to start “growing up,” by which Chödrön means being simultaneously honest and kind with ourselves as we face our messy interior worlds rather than running from them out of fear.⁴ Describing the ways in which hope and fear arise from a sense that we lack something, Chödrön calls us to step into a direct relationship with ourselves so that we can build compassion and bravery:

we could acknowledge that right now we feel like a piece of shit and not be squeamish about taking a good look. That’s the compassionate thing to do. That’s the brave thing to do. We could smell that piece of shit. We could feel it; what is its texture, color, and shape? We can explore the nature of that piece of shit. We can know the nature of dislike, shame, and embarrassment and not believe there’s something wrong with that.⁵

Agency lies in our courage to engage in practices of deep introspection with inquisitiveness and love. Love can be a troublesome concept for many, but the most useful definition I have discovered links it to spaciousness: giving others and ourselves the space to just **be** without judging what we see and experience with shame, guilt, or blame. Chödrön’s call for us to “grow up” is not an admonishment or critique. It is a reference to how bravery and kindness in our willingness to look honestly at ourselves enables us to “forget ourselves and open to the world” (76) so that we can work **with** obstacles instead of avoiding them. Admittedly, there is a part of me that recoils from the childish tantrum of my “I never wanted this” journaling. Rather than tucking it away or ignoring it in search for my “better self,” Chödrön’s work helps me see the writing as a moment of direct contact with thoughts and emotions that I might otherwise avoid. Writing provided space to just **be** who I was in that moment, without judgement and recrimination.

⁴ Chödrön, *Things Fall Apart*, p. 77.

⁵ Chödrön, *Things Fall Apart*, p. 41.

Art, music, and meditation, like writing, are tools that help us encounter ourselves just as we are. But they are not stopping points (nor is hopelessness a stopping point), they are doorways for what Chödrön calls “living an insightful, compassionate life.”⁶ One of the key teachings of Buddhism is working with obstacles, or the four maras: seeking pleasure, trying to be who we think we are, using emotions to keep us asleep, and fear of death.⁷ Obstacles can exist on an outer level or an inner level. On the outer level an obstacle is usually some person or situation that has interrupted our happiness. The inner level of an obstacle is less tangible but is basically not liking the way reality is and wanting it to go away. Chödrön writes:

Perhaps there is no solid obstacle except our own need to protect ourselves from being touched...It just keeps returning with new names, forms, and manifestations until we learn what it has to teach us about where we are separating ourselves from reality, how we are pulling back instead of opening up, closing down instead of allowing ourselves to experience fully whatever we encounter, without hesitating or retreating into ourselves.⁸

Outer obstacles are unavoidable and they never go away. Inner obstacles (unique to each of us) are things we can become really familiar with through inquisitiveness and non-judgementalism. We learn to dance with them rather fighting or running from them. Chödrön suggests that when an inner obstacle metaphorically “knocks at your door,” it is a good practice to invite them in and have them sit at your table so you can get to know them. Barring the door with a stronger lock because “I never wanted this,” or shouting at them with the wish that “someday” they will stop showing up are delusional hopes that keep us from directly experiencing reality. Avoidance effectively hardens and alienates us through separation from something larger.⁹ Alternatively, working **with** inner obstacles (embracing all the unsavory aspects of our interior worlds) opens us to moments of discomfort, pain, and confusion and, over time, softens us not only to our own pain but also opens us to

⁶ Chödrön, *Things Fall Apart*, p 44.

⁷ It was the forces of Mara that attacked the Buddha the night he sat by a tree and attained enlightenment. Chödrön, *Things Fall Apart*, p. 67.

⁸ Chödrön, *Things Fall Apart*, p. 66.

⁹ Chödrön, *Things Fall Apart*, p. 87.

“kinship with the suffering of others.”¹⁰ In other words, inquisitiveness guided by compassion for self expands outward.

In my own case, anguish, pain, and resentment laid bare on the page and then used in a process of compassionate inquiry into my obstacles opened me to a moment of felt interconnection with something larger: my father’s humanity, my stepmother’s humanity, and my own. Hopelessness, getting totally fed up, totally exhausted with my habitual ways of thinking seemed to open infinite possibility wherein my sense of disconnection dissolved and I experienced expansiveness rather than entrapment. Just a taste of the possibility of not being weighted down with resentment and anger provided the motivation to continue not only “putting one foot in front of the other,” but also the motivation to dive deeper into the storyline that had kept me stuck in familiar cycles of blame.

In her audio series of teachings, *When Pain is the Doorway*, Chödrön unpacks the Lojong slogan “Drive all blames into one,” which attributes suffering to ego-clinging.¹¹ Chödrön challenges how the slogan tends to be used to lay blame on somebody (ourselves or others) and offers a distinction between **trigger** and **cause** of suffering to move us away from the language of blame entirely. Triggers are outer circumstances. Focusing on trigger rather than cause becomes an avoidance strategy and essentially “throws kerosene on the ember of pain.”¹² The cause of suffering lies in what Chödrön calls our “preexisting propensity to be bothered by certain things” or tendencies (sort of like karmic seeds). Our tendencies are tied to an identity and storyline about who we are (which often has a lot of emotional baggage attached to it). We are not all bothered by the same things and this is part of the “good news” of Buddhism according to Chödrön. It opens us to see reality as less fixed, less solid, and work with difficult emotions and thoughts. For example, it has often befuddled me why friends who have witnessed my father’s slide into blackout are unphased by it. I alternated between blaming him for not getting help, blaming myself for feeling shame and judgmentalism towards him, and blaming my friends for downplaying his addiction. Instead of being caught in the language of blame and outer circumstances (my friends just “didn’t get it”), I could

¹⁰ Chödrön, *Things Fall Apart*, p. 86.

¹¹ Chödrön, Pema. *When Pain is the Doorway*. Sounds True, 2013.

¹² Chödrön, *When Pain is the Doorway*.

shift my attention to the cause: my preexisting propensity to be bothered by certain things (figuring out exactly what they are and inviting them to my table).

Ultimately the objective of this distinction (and the practices she offers as techniques for working directly with the cause of suffering) is to weaken the propensity to be bothered in order to have more skillful responses to outer circumstances (de-escalating rather than throwing kerosene on the fire). Directing attention to cause rather than trigger is part of the “good news” of hopelessness in her teachings. Events or people who trigger unresolved issues can “teach us to perk up and lean in when we feel we’d rather collapse and back away. They’re like messengers that show us, with terrifying clarity, exactly where we’re stuck”¹³ Importantly, the point of Chödrön’s distinction between cause and trigger is not to suggest that “reality doesn’t exist” or that there are not injustices in our lives. It is a practice that aims to give us more “clear seeing” so that we can address outer circumstances with less reactivity.

My father’s alcoholism and the entrapment in the house were outer circumstances. They were triggers that set off a habitual storyline driven by ancient fears and pains: loss of self, loss of control. These were the real obstacles. These were the real cause of my suffering. I needed to be able to experience them clearly, honestly, and kindly to distinguish between trigger and cause. It wasn’t REALLY about my father or the lockdown or addiction, which is not to dismiss the emotional pain and anguish. But the point is: triggers are external and we often end up responding to the external circumstance when the causes of our suffering are much deeper. Contemplative practices and spaces can enable us to come into contact with them so that we might use more skillful responses to open into something larger than the self. For some, behaviors of an addict may roll off their shoulders; for others those same behaviors can lead outward to blaming and demonizing the addict or inward to blaming and demonizing one’s self. Growing up involves seeing clearly the distinction between trigger and cause, seeing clearly the ego-clinging that projects blame and escalates suffering through disconnection. Hopelessness can be an **opportunity**, not for renewed hope, but for moving beyond delusions fed by ego-clinging.

¹³ Chödrön, *Things Fall Apart*, p. 12.

Early in the pandemic during state-wide lockdowns, the opportunity for introspection and healing was at many of our doorsteps. Many were initially shaken from normal distractions (shopping, going to restaurants or bars, gathering with friends) that block us from actually confronting how we respond to chaos, to the loss of ground under our feet. Along with a million personal implosions during the lockdown (which called many to turn off the streaming apps and social media and, instead, lean directly and honestly into our interior worlds), the lockdown also increasingly highlighted the ways we need to deal honestly with social structures of racism and classism. Some argued early in the pandemic that the virus “did not discriminate,” implying that the pandemic had placed us all on equal ground. However, communities of color were (and continue to be) disproportionately affected by COVID-19. Centuries of accumulated trauma from institutionalized racism resulting in high rates of illnesses like hypertension and diabetes left communities of color more vulnerable to COVID.¹⁴ Decades of poor access to health care along with outright racism in the hands of health care professionals were percolating to the surface news reports on National Public Radio and other popular media outlets.¹⁵ Many jobs were deemed “essential” (grocery clerks, gas station attendants, meat packing plant processors, cleaning staff) which seemed to give better recognition to these often undervalued, under compensated workers, but communities of color disproportionality represent those considered essential workers (who are at higher risk of contracting COVID).¹⁶ Any sense of collective pain captured in yard signs and public announcements that “we are all in this together” was being laid bare by gross inequities accumulated over the life of a nation long invested in the notion that some lives hold more value than other

¹⁴ Discrimination, health care access, occupation, educational gaps, wealth gaps, and housing are all factors identified by the CDC that increase the risk of racial and ethnic minorities for getting sick and dying from COVID. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). *COVID-19. “Health Equity Considerations and Racial and Ethnic Minority Groups.”* [cdc.gov/coronavirus/](https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/).

¹⁵ It is not within the scope of this piece to delineate the ways in which racism plays out in health care, but readers may investigate the ways in the pain and concerns of black patients often are not taken seriously by medical professionals. The death of Susan Moore, a black physician in Indiana, and the American Medical Women’s Association response provides a recent example of this. [amwa-doc.org/news/](https://www.amwa-doc.org/news/).

¹⁶ CDC, *COVID-19*.

lives. Calls for unity in the face of COVID also hit the hard backdrop of videos and stories of Ahmaud Arbery, Christian Cooper, and Breonna Taylor. The early days of the pandemic rendered **more visible** social inequities and just how entrapped we continue to be in a white supremacist society.

I recognize the phrase “white supremacist” might be off-putting to some readers who associate it with morality and narratives of good self/bed self. However, in the spirit of directly confronting that which is an obstacle, I use it to point to what Isabel Wilkerson identifies as a caste system where power and resources are concentrated around the presumed supremacy of whiteness and the presumed inferiority of other groups: “The hierarchy of caste is not about feelings or morality. It is about power – which groups have it and which do not. It is about resources – which caste is seen as worthy of them and which are not, who gets to acquire and control them and who does not. It is about respect, authority, and assumptions of competence – who is accorded these and who is not.”¹⁷ Wilkerson describes our country as an old house that we inherited and live in. Though beautiful on the outside, it was erected centuries ago and has warped joists, cracked pillars, and is sitting on unstable soil. Caste based on racial hierarchy is the infrastructure of our “house” and though we may not have built it, we are the heirs and current occupants of it. Looking at the workings of caste, at white supremacy, is like taking an X-ray of a skeleton to see it. Perhaps because most people were jolted from habitual routines and distractions in the initial months of the pandemic, there seemed to be promise that this moment would have a positive effect of throwing light on white supremacy in ways that renewed conversations about equity and justice.

Memorial Day weekend arrived, and the lockdown was partially lifted. The Twin Cities were starting to come alive with barbeques and open-air dining. I invited Mia, her twin sister, and their dogs over for a cookout. After hitting her own wall of hopelessness, she began again: she had found an apartment to sublease with another queer woman and had interviewed for a job in the Twin Cities. In the midst of what felt like a collective exhale after holding our breath for a month of lockdown,

¹⁷ Wilkerson, Isabel. *Caste: The Origins of our Discontents*. New York: Random House, 2020, p. 17-18.

Derek Chauvin, a white Minneapolis officer murdered George Floyd, while two other Minneapolis police aided him by pinning down Floyd's arms and legs and a third officer held back a growing crowd of people begging for them to stop. The symbolism of a white man kneeling indifferently on a black man's neck – as three other officers willingly enabled him, as he begged for breath, as he begged for his mother, as a crowd witnessed and pleaded with the officers to let him breath – ignited the collective hopelessness of those experiencing and fighting against the pandemic of racism that has plagued our country. The world exploded.

Peaceful protestors were met with police in riot gear. Equipped with military-style gas masks, the police launched tear gas (prohibited in war by the Geneva Protocol of 1925) and rubber bullets into large crowds of citizens enacting their right to assemble. Distressed protestors were removing their pandemic-style cloth masks, choking and gasping for air. They sought milk in the Target store on Lake Street to cleanse eyes and noses from chemical weapons. Rage escalated and windows and doors of stores were smashed, fires were ignited. The Third Precinct building where the four officers work became a symbol of unchecked police brutality and was torched shortly after being abandoned by the remaining police occupying it. Helicopters circled the sky and filled both day and night with their thundering rotors. Oversized military trucks painted in camouflage-green took up residence at primary street intersections. The National Guard, guns in hand, took over street corners and doorways to hospitals and government buildings.

Masses of people took to the streets with masks and signs and loud voices, but there was little in the actual protests that resembled the images I caught glimpses of on the television news when I passed through my father's room. There was outrage, yes, but also a spirit that I can only describe as a felt sense of interconnectivity and collective grief and rage. At every rally and march people circulated with backpacks full of bottled water and granola bars, roaming the crowds and handing out replenishment for anyone in need. People came to Lake Street and University Avenue with their brooms and dustpans to help clean up the broken glass. Hopelessness – total and complete exhaustion – had somehow transformed into collection action.

The un-freedom of lockdown, the literal and metaphorical oppression of a white man with his "knee on the neck" of a black man

ushered in a historical moment of racial reckoning. **This** moment promised to be different from protests around the murder of Michael Brown in Ferguson or Tamir Rice in Cleveland, or Jamar Clark in Minneapolis or Philando Castile in Saint Paul. Large multi-racial, multi-ethnic, multi-generational crowds taking over the streets, demanding justice, demanding accountability spread from Minneapolis and St. Paul across the nation. There was hope in the air that more people were waking to the ways in which no one is untouched by racism, by white supremacy. But I began to feel that the hope I was hearing from many people who had just “woken” up to the inequities of race was premature and quite different from the hope of people who had long been assigned the lowest floors in the caste system of race. It felt like the delusional hope of “someday” and “if only” that Chödrön describes, wanting to skip over the hard, spiritual work of facing ourselves.

James Baldwin believed, parallel to Chödrön, that we need to take a deep dive into our interior worlds to understand who and what we are, to face our deepest sorrows and pains. Whereas Chödrön tends to flatten differences into a “common humanity,” Baldwin highlighted that our common humanity might be an end goal, but each of us begins the dive into our interior worlds from very different places relative to white supremacy and the mythology of the American Dream.¹⁸ Baldwin insisted that we all must excavate how white supremacy has affected our sense of identity, place, and belonging and that the work of excavation is very different for those who have internalized the falsehood of inferiority from those who have internalized the falsehood of superiority. He wrote:

White Americans find it as difficult as white people elsewhere do to divest themselves of the notion that they are in possession of some intrinsic value that black people need, or want. And this assumption – which, for example, makes the solution to the Negro problem depend on the speed with which Negroes accept and adopt white standards – is revealed in all kinds of striking ways, from Bobby Kennedy’s assurance that a Negro can become President in forty years to the unfortunate tone of a warm

¹⁸ His refusal to flatten the “American experience” was perhaps made most visible in his 1965 debate with William F. Buckley framed by the question: “Has the American Dream been achieved at the expense of the American Negro?”

congratulation with which so many liberals address their Negro equal.¹⁹

Counter to the notion that we all should aspire to the privileges of whiteness, Baldwin wrote about whiteness as the “nightmare” of this country.²⁰ Whiteness was (and is) the mechanism and identity used to subjugate and exploit the labor and bodies of black people (and others not deemed “white”) and constitutes a bankrupt identity, which is why Baldwin famously said, “As long as you think you’re white, there’s no hope for you.”²¹ “The Negro Problem,” as some called it in Baldwin’s lifetime, was not actually a problem of black and brown folks, it was a problem of whiteness. Similar to Chödrön’s call for us to stop running from the places within ourselves that are frightening or unsavory, Baldwin exhorted white people to grapple directly with the construction of whiteness (both on an individual level and as the historical and systemic mode by which power and wealth have been accrued in our nation and used to construct a national identity). This is the necessary precursor so that we might be better equipped to do the work of racial healing: “Everything now, we assume, is in our hands; we have no right to assume otherwise. If we – and now I mean the relatively conscious whites and the relatively conscious black, who much, like lovers, insist on, or create, the consciousness of others – do not falter in our duty now, we may be able, handful that we are, to end the racial nightmare, and achieve our country.”²² Agency, knowing what is “in our hands,” what we actually have control over, begins with excavating how white supremacy plays out in our lives or, alternatively, why we have a pre-existing propensity to be bothered” by the term white supremacy itself.

Eddie Glaude details how Baldwin’s life and work offers resources to deal with the “after times” of Trumpism, a term that references the interstitial spaces marked by “the splintering of old ways of living and a making of a new community after the fall.”²³ The COVID

¹⁹ Baldwin, James. “Down at the Cross: Letter from a Region in my Mind.” *The New Yorker*, 17 November 1962, newyorker.com/magazine/1962/11/17/letter-from-a-region-in-my-mind.

²⁰ Baldwin, “Down at the Cross.”

²¹ *James Baldwin: The Price of a Ticket*. Directed by Karen Thorsen and Douglas Dempsey. PBS/American Masters. Original broadcast 1989. pbs.org.

²² Baldwin, “Down at the Cross.”

²³ Glaude, Eddie. *Begin Again: James Baldwin’s America and its Urgent Lessons for Our Own*. New York: Crown, 2020, p. 16.

10 pandemic and the civil unrest in the summer and fall of 2020 in response to unchecked police violence might be considered a similar interstitial space. Glaude describes Baldwin's retreat to Paris in the late '40s as a time of hopelessness wherein the rage and hatred of living in a white supremacist society was beginning to consume him. France gave Baldwin space and distance from which to turn inward and confront his own history of trauma and terror (abusive childhood, white supremacist society, poverty, homophobia, heteronormativity) and the rage, fear, and pain that accompanied the deep self-hatred Baldwin had internalized through the white power structure of America. Suffering and hopelessness in the context of white supremacy, for Baldwin, was a call to discovery and achieving his own authority. Baldwin offered this wisdom:

People who cannot suffer can never grow up, can never discover who they are. That man who is forced each day to snatch his manhood, his identity, out of the fire of human cruelty that rages to destroy it knows, if he survives his effort, and even if he does not survive it, something about himself and human life that no school on earth – and, indeed, no church – can teach. He achieves his own authority, and that is unshakable. This is because, in order to save his life, he is forced to look beneath appearances, to take nothing for granted, to hear the meaning behind the words. If one is continually surviving the worst that life can bring, one eventually ceases to be controlled by a fear of what life can bring; whatever it brings must be borne. And at this level of experience one's bitterness begins to be palatable, and hatred becomes too heavy a sack to carry.²⁴

Glaude argues that interior excavation was the necessary foundation from which Baldwin was able to re-create himself. From that place, he was able to offer clear seeing into what the soul of our nation needs to heal, which Glaude describes as understanding "the lie": the contradiction between our ideals and mythology about democracy, freedom, and equality and our history of white supremacy built on greed, domination, and exploitation. Glaude explains, the lie attempts to hide "our dispositions, our habits, our practices, and our social and

²⁴ Baldwin, "Down at the Cross."

political and economic arrangements” and creates a “value gap” between whites and those deemed “other.”²⁵

The lie that we are a redeemer nation, the greatest democracy of all has been rendered ever more clear by COVID as well as by the continued murder of unarmed black and brown citizens and subsequent state-sanctioned use of more police violence against protestors exercising their rights. Media images after the murder of George Floyd, Ahmaud Arbery, and Breonna Taylor of police clubbing, gassing, and pepper spraying peaceful protestors across the nation were a flashback to an earlier era of civil rights protests (the march from Selma to Montgomery, the Freedom Riders, and Stonewall). Policing is part of the lie, but it’s not just the institution of policing. The lie exists in tacit acceptance of mass incarceration of black and brown men and women in the ever-expanding for-profit prison industry,²⁶ in public schooling where as long as “our” children have the best education we are little concerned with the structure of inequity upon which it is built,²⁷ in maternal health care where black women are three times more likely to die in childbirth than white women,²⁸ in general health care where black Americans are systematically under-treated for pain because of myths that black skin is thicker or has fewer nerve endings than white skin,²⁹ and in the ways in which we continue to buy into the idea that the police are protecting our communities even as our black and brown communities are telling us a different story, even as we see video after video of unarmed men, women, and children being murdered by police.

²⁵ “James Baldwin’s Fire.” *Throughline* from NPR, 17 September 2020, npr.org/2020/09/14/912769283/james-baldwins-fire.

²⁶ The work of Angela Davis and Ruth Wilson Gilmore are good places to start in understanding this history.

²⁷ Jonathan Kozol has written about structural inequities in education for over half a century. Minnesota, often considered a “progressive” state with an excellent public school system, has some of the largest racial disparities in education. This has also become clearer during the pandemic in which access to highspeed internet and computers has widened the gap in educational equity. mprnews.org/story/2020/09/25/in-focus-equity-in-education-an-mpr-news-community-event.

²⁸ CDC. “Racial and Ethnic Disparities Continue in Pregnancy – Related Deaths.” dc.gov/media/releases/2019/p0905-racial-ethnic-disparities-pregnancy-deaths.html.

²⁹ American Public Media and Minnesota Public Radio. *Call to Mind*. “Spotlight on Black Trauma and Policing.” 3 June 2020. youtube.com/watch?v=s2dCIXvCk74.

As someone committed to anti-racism, I spend much of my time further expanding and educating myself through reading, listening to podcasts, and watching documentaries. Having begun the work of addressing whiteness, white privilege, and the socio-political construction of whiteness in my late teenage years as part of an active, anti-racist queer community and later focusing my career in education on teaching and writing with a social justice emphasis, I thought that I had a good understanding of “the lie” and the ways white supremacy operates through our social and political systems. But participating in protests in the summer of 2020, listening to community leaders at rallies, as well as listening to the extended coverage of race, trauma, and policing that Minnesota Public Radio offered in the two weeks following the murder of George Floyd, I came into contact with voices and perspectives that made me realize that my world was still too narrow and that I had too many “white voices” feeding news into my ears (mostly MPR and podcasts created and hosted by white folks).³⁰ In a context of a “second awakening,” when I was doubling down on my commitments to living and working as an antiracist, I began hearing what felt like hollow calls for hope from many white people that we had taken a turn towards a “post-racial” America because more white people were showing up to Black Lives Matter protests and displaying signs of support in the form of yard signs.

Masses of white people showing up to protests and standing shoulder to shoulder with long-time community activists and organizers is important work, but it’s not enough nor does it begin to tap the depth of work we need to do as white people. The leap towards hope by white people strikes me as dangerous because there is much internal work to be done. “[Baldwin] urged Americans to plunge beneath the surface of the race problem” Glaude writes, “and examine our interior agreement with ways of thinking that trapped us in the lie.”³¹ This is where Chödrön’s sense of hopelessness seems crucial. White people need a

³⁰ This was confirmed when the MPR union launched its “Transform MPR” campaign in September 2020. In their open letter, they state: “Our company culture and our news coverage routinely prioritizes white audiences and their stories, neglecting communities of color. The company, over its 53-year history, has also fostered a harmful working environment for women and journalists of color.” transformmpr.org/.

³¹ Glaude, p. 15.

sense of *ye tang che*, we need to become “totally fed up, totally exhausted” with our habitual ways of thinking and being in the world so that we can move away from the rhetoric of blame and guilt organized around good self/bad self that has tended to frame conversations about white supremacy. Hopelessness can be the motivation to have a more direct confrontation with the parts of ourselves that Baldwin called white people to confront. And here will be the hard part for many white people: though we may claim “I never wanted this [to be white],” we remain tied to an empty identity, an identity not tethered to land or language or ethnic culture, but an identity created to justify subjugation. Whiteness was built on an edifice of insecurities and pains that needs an “other” over against which to elevate itself through domination, exploitation, and greed. Baldwin wrote:

The failure of the private life has always had the most devastating effect on American public conduct, and on black-white relations. If Americans were not so terrified of their private selves, they would never have needed to invent and could never have become so dependent on what they still call “the Negro problem.” This problem, which they invented in order to safeguard their purity, has made of them criminals and monsters, and it is destroying them; and this not from anything blacks may or may not be doing but because of the role a guilty and constricted white imagination has assigned to the blacks.... People pay for what they do, and, still more, for what they have allowed themselves to become. And they pay for it very simply: by the lives they lead. The crucial thing, here, is that the sum of these individual abdications menaces life all over the world.³²

Stepping into hopelessness means facing how whiteness was constructed in the name of nation building. Whiteness was an identity created to ensure the exploitation of bodies and labor for the accumulation of wealth and later it became an identity proffered to some immigrants as an incentive to resist building coalitions that would have challenged the small group of elite, wealthy property owners. It was an identity created around a hierarchy of “races” that was intended to justify terror and wealth-building and protect whites from the lie of “innocence.”

Undoubtedly this will be painful and there will be a sense of “loss of

³² Baldwin, James. *No Name in the Street*. New York: Dell Publishing, 1972, p. 54-55.

self,” but this is part of “growing up.” We can bar the door to painful thoughts and emotions or we can invite the “unwanted guest” to sit at our table and become familiar with them, as Chödrön suggest we do in working with obstacles. Baldwin references doing this work of excavating whiteness with a sense of daring that parallels Chödrön’s call to unflinchingly confront at ourselves: “Love takes off the masks that we fear we cannot live without and know we cannot live within. I use the word ‘love’ here not merely in the personal sense but as a state of being, or a state of grace – not in the infantile American sense of being made happy but in the **tough and universal sense of quest and daring and growth.**”³³ I have a sense that more white people are at an inflection moment where we know we cannot live within the mask of whiteness. The tough route, the daring move will be to **not** jump into a hope that recenters our sense of comfort at the cost of excavating our “interior agreement with ways of thinking that trapped us in the lie.”

John Biewen’s two podcast series with Chenjerai Kumanyika (one on whiteness and one on our history of democracy) offer entry points into this excavation.³⁴ In an interview reflecting on his work, Biewen suggests there are parallels between living as an antiracist³⁵ and Buddhist principles:

There’s an element of letting go of, loosening your grip on aspects of your identity or of the things that you thought you knew, and of a growing comfort with a process...and sitting with discomfort or with that process of... strengthening your letting-go muscle...having spent decades of thinking that I was one of the good ones, one of the good non-racists, because of the way I was raised and because, look, I’m a public radio journalist, and I’ve reported on race, and so clearly, I’m one of the good white people – to then be confronted with history and facts and analyses that make you go, Oh, wait a second, there are several deeper levels here, and there’s much deeper work that I still have to do, and ...

³³ Baldwin, “Down at the Cross,” emphasis mine.

³⁴ “The Land That’s Never Been.” John Biewen, host/producer. *Scene on Radio* from Duke University: Center for Documentary Studies, sceneonradio.org.

³⁵ There are no “non-racists” according to Ibram Kendi’s work. Because we are all born into a racist society, we are either supporting anti-racism or supporting racism (through policies, practices, and behaviors). *How to be an Antiracist*. New York: One World, 2019.

with trepidation and with limitations... trying to have the courage to do that work.³⁶

There is a danger of confusing accountability with blame when directly confronting one's whiteness. Blame involves finger wagging that shores up one's ego and sense of individuality, accountability involves reflection and a sense of collective responsibility. Accountability is recognizing and accounting for the ways in which we are interconnected beings whose very existence depends on our relationality – there is no "I" without a "we," there is no "blackness" without "whiteness." We do the internal work to render ourselves more accountable and more present for the larger societal work that needs to be done. We do the internal work so that we can have clear seeing for the external work of interrupting and dismantling the system of white supremacy as it manifests in material practices and policies. Biewen describes this as a movement from complacency and believing "I'm not implicated" in the system of white power, to understanding that the system of white supremacy is so deeply rooted in our nation that it runs like a well-oiled machine:

All that our systems of hierarchy and injustice [racism, classism]...need to just keep rolling along is for all of the "good white people" to just go about our lives, being good, nonracist white people, because the systems are embedded deeply enough in our society, in our culture, that they function pretty much on their own, and so...we need to be about disrupting them. And that takes a certain kind of openness in the way we scrutinize things, the way we look at ourselves, the way we look at our relationship to the world as it is, the way we look at how we all got to this moment. And we need to be willing to rethink things, and do things differently.³⁷

Being a "good white person" (not being one of those "others" who tells racist jokes or backs racist policies and or excuses racist statements) has **no** impact on the way whites continue to be benefactors of this system. Whites can go on about our daily lives, moving farther and farther into willful ignorance, and in so doing, we are effectively complicit with the system. When white people say things like "I don't see color," we cannot

³⁶ "The Long View, I: On Being White." *On Being with Krista Tippett*, 29 October 2020, onbeing.org/programs/john-biewen-the-long-view-i-on-being-white.

³⁷ "The Long View, I: On Being White."

see how whiteness mediates our daily experiences, and we cannot see how racism affects the lives of black and brown people. White people may proclaim, "I never asked to be born white," but that misses the critical point of departure wherein willingness to be open and inquisitive can help us expand beyond the ego-clinging that promises to protect us from unwanted feelings and thoughts.

Another entry point for doing the work of excavation comes from the work of Resmaa Menakem. Following the work of Joy DeGruy on post-traumatic slave syndrome, Menakem has much to teach us about racialized trauma, intergenerational trauma, and doing explicit body work that can help us "grow up." He offers explicit practices in noticing and addressing what we are carrying in our bodies so that we can work towards racial healing and becoming "unstuck" from historical trauma. Menakem details the ways in which the English brought much of the brutality of the Middle Ages to the "new world" in the form of trauma:

The trauma that now lives in the bodies of so many African Americans did not begin when those bodies first encountered white ones. This trauma can be traced back much further, through generation upon generation of white bodies, to medieval Europe...When the English came to America, they brought much of their resilience, much of their brutality, and, I believe, a great deal of their trauma with them. Common punishments meted out in England, which included whipping, branding, and cutting off ears. People were routinely placed in stocks or pillories, or in the gallows with a rope around their neck. While they were thus immobilized, passersby would spit or throw garbage at them.³⁸

Whiteness came out of a ghastly history. Menakem argues that we have tried to teach our brains to think differently about race, but the real battlefield of the racial conflict is in our bodies, in our nervous system. He insists: "For America to outgrow the bondage of white-body supremacy, white Americans need to imagine themselves in Black bodies and experience what those bodies had to endure. They also need to do the same with the bodies of their own white ancestors. And they need to ask themselves this question: 'If we don't address our ancient historical trauma, what will we pass down to our children, and to their children

³⁸ Menakem, Resmaa. *My Grandmother's Hands*. Las Vegas: Central Recovery Press, 2017, p. 61.

and grandchildren?"³⁹ Doing this work, which he details in his book, will take us into our messy interior territories as well as outward into difficult social spaces where we will have to invent new ways being, letting go of a relationship to self and perceived "other" learned through socialization, letting go of identities and narratives about who we are that have kept us from reckoning with that past.

His most important point: we cannot put black and brown bodies in the same room with white bodies and expect healing, particularly through Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion workshops (also called DEI trainings). This only creates a re-traumatizing effect for black and brown bodies who are often subjected to denials that racism exists, or asked to take on the role of caretaker and comforter, or asked to "educate" white people:

We're hurting each other. We're re-wounding each other. Some of the things that we go to that are "supposed to" help and "supposed to" heal, really are re-wounding and are violent. There is a constant need to suss out whether or not I'm safe with this white woman or this white man or this structure. And so those types of things need to be handled and taken care of with the amount of legitimacy and the amount of care that they should have. And to slam people in the room, given the histories that our bodies have experienced, and just slam people in the room willy-nilly and then say, "Let's talk about race," means that you are not giving the respect to the issue of race that it deserves.⁴⁰

Though our work in racial reckoning will need to be collective, it also requires individual work and separate kinds of work for those born into whiteness wherein we will have to become more comfortable with discomfort and let go of imagined innocence.

Along similar lines, Serene Jones, writes about trauma and grace from a Christian theological framework.⁴¹ She examines how we use storytelling to construct who we were, who we are, and who we will become. Using her own stories and the stories passed down by her family about their commitment to social justice and anti-racism, she

³⁹ Menakem, p. 61.

⁴⁰ "Notice the Rage, Notice the Silence." *On Being with Krista Tippett*. 4 June 2020. onbeing.org/programs/resmaa-menakem-notice-the-rage-notice-the-silence/.

⁴¹ Jones, Serene. *Call it Grace: Finding Meaning in a Fractured World*. New York: Penguin Books, 2020.

details a moment of awakening when she saw a postcard of a lynching with the name of her hometown in Oklahoma with the date, 1911. With only 300 people in the town at the time, two-thirds of whom were her relatives, Jones realizes that there is no way that her family would not have known about the lynching and if they had **not** participated in it, they would have certainly passed down the story as part of their family narrative of resistance and commitment to social justice. This moment of implosion for Jones was a “bottom,” a place to start again, and question what she calls a “dangerous innocence,” or the way in which many white people do not want to examine how our family stories and identities are tied to white supremacy.

Researching her family and confronting untold stories of how and when her family became white helped her see a larger national narrative about race and racism through a trauma framework. Much like individual trauma, collective trauma is often repressed. We may not deal with what happened, but the harm still haunts. White supremacy, understood as trauma, is a horror that will continue to haunt us as long as we attempt to avoid or repress how it has shaped our sense of self and belonging. Asking “when and how did I ‘become white,’” or researching “when did my family ‘become white’” are starting points for excavating white supremacy.

Comfort and imagined innocence are secured at a cost. For Baldwin, the cost was two-fold: the very real and material suffering of black and brown people and the loss of humanity for the white people who stand-by and allow the lie of democracy, freedom, and equity to continue. To remain in a position of power (even if only through complicity), one’s range of motion and expression of self is limited by one’s proximity to the mechanism that sustains that power relation.⁴² Whiteness is not simply nor primarily about skin tone or other physical features. It is and has been a mechanism of power. Simply denouncing whiteness or proclaiming color-blindness does nothing to address that mechanism of power. To hold others down, whether literally or figuratively, whether through active violence or complicit acceptance and inaction to excavate the workings of that mechanism of power, is to lose pieces of one’s own humanity and freedom. We can see the loss of

⁴² Imagine someone standing with one foot on the neck of another and the other foot free. To maintain their position of dominance, where they can go and who they can be are restricted by the range of movement allowed by the free foot.

humanity in the faces of white spectators who came to watch lynchings that were photographed and later sold and circulated as postcards. We can see it in the blank face of Derek Chauvin as he knelt on George Floyd's neck. We can see it in the entitled outrage of Amy Cooper who refused to leash her dog in Central Park when Christian Cooper asked her to do so and who then proceeded to call 911 to report being "threatened" by a black man and to "send the cops immediately." We can see it in the self-satisfied expressions of (mostly) white women calling police or other authorities on black folks as they lead their daily lives.⁴³ We can see it in the indifference of white folks who watch video after video after video of unarmed black and brown men and women being murdered and who ask questions like "why did he resist?" or "why did he run away?" rather than being taken to their knees in pain and grief.⁴⁴

In his 1963 interview with Dr. Kenneth Clark on "The Negro and the American Promise," Baldwin referenced a photograph taken of five white Birmingham, Alabama police officers arresting a female Civil Rights activist: one kneels on her neck, two others restrain her hands and legs, and two others are on-lookers. In response to the lack of outrage on the part of the white people, Baldwin stated, "I'm terrified at the moral apathy – the death of the heart – which is happening in my country. These people have deluded themselves for so long that they really don't think I'm human. I have braces on their conduct, not on what they say. And this means that they have become, in themselves, moral monsters."⁴⁵ Fifty-seven years. In 1963 a photographer captures police kneeling on the neck of a black woman. In 2020 Darnella Frazier captures a video of police kneeling on the neck of a black man. Frazier's video seems to have woken many white people, who are just now feeling the

⁴³ There are too many to list here, but many have been turned into memes (Permit Patty, BBQ Becky and Cornerstone Caroline to name a few). The Washington Post offers some insight into how these are not cute or innocent moments, but expressions of whiteness and very real threats to lives of black and brown people targeted. [washingtonpost.com/news/morning-mix/wp/2018/10/19/bbq-becky-permit-patty-and-cornerstone-caroline-too-cutesy-for-those-white-women-calling-cops-on-blacks/](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/morning-mix/wp/2018/10/19/bbq-becky-permit-patty-and-cornerstone-caroline-too-cutesy-for-those-white-women-calling-cops-on-blacks/).

⁴⁴ In her examination of ethics and the ways in which our grief and mourning reveal our interconnectivity, she asks us to consider whose lives are considered "grievable" and whose lives are not? *Giving an Account of Oneself*. New York: Fordham Press, 2005.

⁴⁵ James Baldwin Interview with Dr. Kenneth Clark. *Open Vault from GHB*, 24 May 1963, openvault.wgbh.org/catalog/V_C03ED1927DCF46B5A8C82275DF4239F9.

outrage of unchecked police power and the litany of black and brown lives taken by “public safety officers,” who are just now experiencing the grief of traumatized families and communities who have long been subjected to a racialized code which represents black and brown people as “threat” and justifies violence sanctioned by local governments. I hear many white people talking about hope. Hope that THIS moment – the massive protests; the police tear gassing and beating its own citizens; the pandemic with growing awareness of systemic inequities along lines of race and class and gender; the growing wealth gap as stock markets rally while wage workers lose their jobs, cannot pay their bills, and are threatened with evictions from their homes – is what will mobilize more people to join a collective movement to undermine white supremacy. There is hope that the image of a white man’s knee literally on the neck of a black man was the moment that “woke” up the majority.

But do white people have the stamina to stay “woke” and do the individual work required of racial reckoning and healing that those multi-racial, multi-ethnic, multi-generational crowds of protestors seemed to promise after George Floyd was murdered? It’s an open question, an honest question. I am not hopeful in the delusional sense, but I am also not unhopeful. Positive changes are happening, not the least of which was the thoroughness of the prosecution’s case against Derek Chauvin and the subsequent findings by the jury that hold him accountable for the murder of George Floyd. Most certainly, those who come to the table of a racial reckoning with privileges and comfort born of white supremacy will find it hard to embrace hopelessness, will find it hard to renounce the hope that we are something that we never were. There will be efforts to turn too quickly to the old narratives of American exceptionalism or the self-satisfied conclusion that we have “arrived” (much like those who claimed the election of Barak Obama marked a “post-racial” era). This is delusional hope.

There is no “how to” manual in this work, no weekend retreat we can attend, and no Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion workshop that will undo systems organized around the supremacy of whiteness and centuries of constructed racial identities. Too often those in positions of privilege and power want recipes or solutions packaged neatly and delivered to their proverbial doorstep. Hopelessness (in Chödrön’s sense of being totally fed up with our habitual ways of thinking and dealing with discomfort) is motivation to live differently. It is motivation to enact

curiosity with compassion rather than leaping towards delusional hopes built around ego and securing the borders of our fabricated identities (“good person,” “good nation”) or the opposite when we beat ourselves up with judgements, blame, and self-recrimination (“bad person,” “bad nation”). In this current moment when more white people are becoming “woke,” white hope is premature. Curiosity goes a long way, as does listening to new voices, putting a check-valve on the stream of white-dominated media that feeds us information, and seeking out voices, lives, and experiences of communities to whom we may live adjacent, but never really know or hear. Unlike delusional hope, these are our human superpowers. They are **not** practices white supremacy teaches whites to embody, but they are where some of our agency lies: not in preconceived outcomes, not in arriving at a place of security that we have determined in advance, not in “getting what we want.”

Spiritual journeys and healing journeys often start with despair because we have arrived at a place where our normal modes of being and strategies have not worked. It may seem dangerous in the context of interrelated pandemics (COVID and white supremacy) to embrace hopelessness when so many are struggling just to keep their heads above water spiritually, mentally, and physically. Hopelessness is not acquiescence; it is a mode of being **with** our pain and suffering that can interrupt our habitual inclinations towards escapism such that we can build a more honest relationship to self, which is the cornerstone to reckoning and beginning the processes of healing our nation. This moment of reckoning is about growing up: accepting that we have not “arrived,” that we are “in process,” that we keep making ourselves anew. Hopelessness is the bottom. We either grow and develop or we shrink into smallness and an ever-narrowing world built on delusional hopes of ego-clinging, which is the ultimate form of lockdown and entrapment.