

Healing and Joy as Resistance

Words of Wisdom from a Beloved Activist

by *Nineequa Blanding*

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“Don’t compare your happiness with others. There’s no such thing as perfection. You create that for yourself, and you are responsible for your own happiness. You must create your happiness for yourself. Anything is possible—go out and get it. You must get up, get out there, and go get it.”

Caring for myself is not self-indulgence, it is self-preservation, and that is an act of political warfare.

—Audre Lorde (*A Burst of Light: Essays*)¹

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hen I sat down with Dr. Lourdes Ashley Hunter-Fowler to discuss her healing justice work and two-decades-long journey as an activist for trans rights, we paused—at her request and to my delight—to take a few deep, synchronous breaths and ground ourselves before starting the interview. Dr. Hunter-Fowler is the founder and executive director of the Trans Women of Color Collective—an expansive coalition designed to uplift the narratives, leadership, and lived experiences of trans people of color while building toward the collective liberation of all oppressed people. She describes herself as a “Black, trans, nonbinary, neurodivergent, disabled—or ably different” individual. She also identifies as “a healer, orator, academic and educator, a dismantler of oppressive systems, a descendant of enslaved Africans, freedom fighters, and liberators.”² For Dr. Hunter-Fowler, living at the intersection of these identities grounds her work resisting systemic oppression and creates avenues toward healing and liberation.

A resounding theme, as we spoke, was the importance of incorporating self-care in one’s work to create positive change in the world. Dr. Hunter-Fowler illuminated throughout how cultivating healing and joy—critical dimensions of self-preservation and care—is an act of resistance. “Some people dream,” she declared. “I live. We should all be able to live out our dreams.”

A response to the fatal violence against trans people

It was her vision as a healer that led Dr. Hunter-Fowler to start TWOCC. In 2013, she joined forces with thirteen other trans women to establish the collective in response to the ongoing attacks of trans people, particularly Black trans women, and in particular the murder of Islan Nettles—a young woman who was fatally assaulted at the age of twenty-one. “We had to heal,” said Dr. Hunter-Fowler, as she



recounted hearing the news of Nettles's murder and described the subsequent vigil that was held in her memory.

She [Nettles] was brutally beaten in front of a police station. *Nobody* helped her. She was twenty-one years old, in the prime of her life. A fashion student, just walking her dog. She told the man [who approached her] she was trans, and he beat her. And we say visibility is important, [and] we need to disclose who we are, but that can get you killed. The community came together. They had a vigil, but the vigil was led by cis people. They misgendered her, called her by her birth name, and they didn't take into consideration the trans community. So, we had to heal from that trauma as we were also healing from [the death of] this young woman.

Unfortunately, the murder of Islan Nettles is one of many fatal attacks that persist today. The Human Rights Campaign—an advocacy group that is recognized as the largest LGBTQ political lobbying organization within the United States—has tracked fifty fatal attacks of transgender people in 2021 alone.³ These fatalities represent a significant increase from when HRC started tracking the attacks eight years earlier, and those numbers may be higher: current records may not fully capture the extent of fatal attacks endured by trans people in the United States. The trans community has also faced political threats that include an increasing and unprecedented number of anti-transgender bills in state legislatures, as well as public narratives that are demeaning and stigmatizing. Tori Cooper, director of community engagement for the Transgender Justice Initiative at the HRC Foundation, has noted,

In 2021, we've seen the highest number of transgender and gender non-conforming people killed in a single year since we began tracking these deaths in 2013. These victims had families and friends, hopes and dreams. None of them deserved to have their lives stolen by such horrific violence. Most of the victims were Black trans women . . . an appalling trend of violence. **This horrific violence is fueled by racism, toxic masculinity, misogyny and transphobia. We need everyone to join us in empowering transgender leaders, building safer, stronger communities and reducing stigma.** We cannot rest until all transgender and gender non-conforming people can live our lives safely as our full selves.⁴

Dr. Hunter-Fowler—along with thirteen founding partners—recognized a need to create safe, affirming spaces for healing and also to uplift the experiences of trans people, especially Black trans women: “We had to focus on our own. We had to write [our narrative] ourselves, and we had to develop the tools.” She continued,

When we started [the] Trans Women of Color Collective, it was me and thirteen other trans women: Janet Mock, Laverne Cox, Nala Simone, Brooke Cerda Guzmán, Aisha Lyons, and many [other] trans women who were focused on healing. We started speaking at conferences. We started controlling our own narrative, having healing retreats. I remember [thinking] this is what we can do. We do not have to wait for somebody to do it for us.

TWOCC was created to provide economic opportunities and affirming spaces for trans people of color and their families to build community and engage in healing and restorative justice practices through arts, culture, media, advocacy, and activism.⁵ The efforts of TWOCC center those “who have not had access to resources, opportunities and sustainable systems of support to live unapologetically in their truths.”⁶ Dr. Hunter-Fowler describes her work as focusing on uplifting and celebrating the beauty and ingenuity that exists among trans people of color while also being responsive to their needs as a community. She explains:

Whatever the community says that they need, we provide. There's no blueprint. There's no curriculum. We ask the community what it is they need, and we provide it, whether it's food, shelter, or a hug. At a moment's notice. According to what the community needs, whatever I have, you should have it too. And let's get it together.

This is an approach that aligns well with healing justice efforts—a framework used to respond to generational trauma, facilitate collective healing, and transform systemic oppression.⁷ It proposes that healing and joy are essential elements of liberation. It is also the basis of TWOCC's work—namely, the Healing and Restorative Justice Initiative, which is a signature effort under way to “shift the narrative [from] surviving to thriving” in trans communities of color and elevate those “who have had their voices stolen, usurped, commodified, silenced and exploited by cis gaze, colonization, anti-Blackness, imperialism and transphobia.”⁸

“Our young people, they’re not waiting. They are stepping up. And it’s important for them to have direction, guidance, and inspiration. And it’s important for us to be that for them [while] also letting them find their own way.”

—Dr. Lourdes Ashley Hunter-Fowler

For Dr. Hunter-Fowler, healing justice is . . .

. . . understanding how white supremacy, cisnet patriarchy, colonialism, [and] capitalism are embedded in every aspect of government and life. We need to create solutions outside of those systems. We don’t need to correct these systems [because] we didn’t create them. We don’t need to fix them, they’re not our problem. What we need to do is create modes and operations outside of those systems, so that we can heal from the trauma that they cause and restore ourselves back to who we were, back to who our ancestors were. And we can do that. It’s just going to take some time—and that’s okay.

Prioritizing youth leadership to create meaningful change

As part of the work to create new systems of support, TWOCC engages in a wide range of activities in the areas of education and wellness, and disburses funds (including a COVID-19 rapid response fund) and financial resources to fulfill such community needs as housing, food, and clothing. In addition to providing those resources, TWOCC maintains a focus on supporting youth leadership in cultivating affirming spaces for communities to engage in healing and restorative justice. “We lean in with an intentional response to the trauma our community has endured by leading with the voices and leadership of our youth and young people.”⁹

“They’re our future,” said Dr. Hunter-Fowler, as she explained her rationale for investing in youth leadership and letting their voices drive TWOCC’s advocacy work. Alongside youth leaders, TWOCC has hosted initiatives in over forty states in the United States, and has global initiatives in Switzerland, England, Norway, Jamaica, and East Africa to facilitate cultural exchanges and anthropological studies with community organizers. These efforts are in service of curating a global platform to further the work of collective liberation.¹⁰ Dr. Hunter-Fowler explains,

Our young people are doing amazing things. A lot of times, people must go through these entry-level jobs

and work their way up. We make all our young people directors. We ask: “What is it that you want to do?” “What is it that you do well?” “You want to be the director of fashion?” “You want to be the director of art?” We give them [the] power to explore and celebrate our lives as queer folks, as folks from the African diaspora, [through] art and fashion. Our national director—Nyla Foster—won Miss Black Trans International, and she used her art and her talent to bring awareness to the lives of trans people. She’s also a youth counselor, and deals with housing insecurity in Kansas City. We’re helping young people realize their dreams, whatever it is that they’re dreaming to do. We’re not here to say, “Oh, you must go to college in order to be successful.” If they want to go to college, they can go, [and] we’re helping them through college; but you don’t have to go to college to be important, to follow your passion, to follow your dreams. We’re shifting that narrative, and we’re giving out the titles. Yes, I’m a doctor. That’s the path I took because society says titles [are needed] to be heard. But I get to use that power to create opportunities and curate opportunities for others.

Our young people, they’re not waiting. They are stepping up. And it’s important for them to have direction, guidance, and inspiration. And it’s important for us to be that for them [while] also letting them find their own way.

Dr. Hunter-Fowler’s human rights activism and her commitment to supporting youth leadership draws both from the inspiration of her parents and leaders like Shirley Chisholm—who paved the way before her—and from the challenging experiences in her life as a trauma survivor:

Life has not been easy. But it’s the journey and it’s your legacy that’s important. The journey was worth it. When I get phone calls and emails from parents of trans kids saying, “My child is going to be just like you,” I [respond], “No, your child is going to be greater than me.” The ability to sponsor and support young trans people through their art and through their ministry makes life worth living. It keeps me going every single day.

“Every breath a trans person of color takes is an act of revolution.”

—Dr. Lourdes Ashley Hunter-Fowler

I could remember at five and six years old, marching down Woodward Avenue with my mom. She was part of the United Automobile Workers (a labor union representing workers in auto, aircraft, and agricultural implement manufacturing, and other industries). She worked at Chrysler. My father worked at Ford. They're both retired. We were always fighters for the people. I was raised in service to the community, and as I began to get older—at seventeen—I started an organization called New Generations in Detroit, which was a space for LGBTQ youth. [As an adult,] I went to New York City with forty dollars in my pocket on a one-way ticket, and I was going to work at the shelter and figure it out. They (workers at the shelter) noted, You can't be trans here. So, I found myself in a men's shelter [and] having to get on welfare. I can remember being in the shelter, [being] sexually abused, raped, [and] violated. And I had a case manager. She said, You're getting out of here, and she helped me find my first apartment. So, there are angels out here, and I just want to give back this portion of what was given to me. For me, Trans Women of Color Collective is an extension of that history of service.

Maintaining self-care while in service of others

Dr. Hunter-Fowler is a staunch advocate of maintaining self-care while working in service of others. She noted that as part of her effort to create positive change in the world, “I [also] need to focus on me, and make sure I am here for the next generation, for my family, for my children, for my husband, for my mother. I think we should all think about that as we are in service—that we are also making sure we're taking care of ourselves.” As she spoke, Audre Lorde's famous words, “Caring for myself is not self-indulgence, it is self-preservation, and that is an act of political warfare,” etched themselves into my mind. Her words are also reminiscent of those of longtime activist Angela Davis, who has said, “Anyone who's interested in making change in the world, also has to learn how to take care of herself, himself, themselves.”¹¹

With healing and restorative justice as their mission, Dr. Hunter-Fowler and her husband have extended their homes—in Jamaica and Maryland—to others as safe and affirming communal spaces for trans leaders, in support of their artistic expression and leadership. Dr. Hunter-Fowler has created an artist residency fellowship and a mentorship

program for executive directors. While she and her husband live on the lower level of their home in Maryland, for example—which is also fully equipped with a gallery space and large, private yard surrounded by a forest for healing retreats—guests and mentees have access to residency spaces on the upper levels.

For Dr. Hunter-Fowler, this work to uplift and celebrate the voices and experiences of trans people, particularly Black trans women like herself, is a joy and a dream come true. The impetus for starting TWOCC—to create healing spaces in response to the fatal attacks of trans people—still holds precedence today. For years, with the ongoing violence coupled with systemic oppression, many Black trans women have operated under the notion that their life expectancy is no more than thirty-five years. As such, Dr. Hunter-Fowler states, “Every breath a trans person of color takes is an act of revolution.”

When I leave my home, I don't know if I'm going to return. My mother has already buried two of her children, and she has two left. I can't let her down. So, I know every breath I take is shaking the room. I have to take these breaths, because my life depends on it, my mother's life depends on it, my legacy depends on it, [as does] the legacy of Black trans women.

A breath shifts the narrative, because somebody didn't get to breathe today. And so many Black trans people—trans people overall—don't have access to opportunities. They're struggling. I used to be one of them.

So, I have to get up—and even if I lay down a little bit, that's fine, too.

I asked Dr. Hunter-Fowler to share her thoughts on what our future would look like if we all operated from a place of healing. Her response was one word: “Bliss.” In that moment, we paused and imagined what bliss means to us. For Dr. Hunter-Fowler, bliss means:

Flowers and rainbows and butterflies and unicorns and cheesecake. Fried chicken. Sunny days, starlit nights. And that's what I'm trying to create. We must start somewhere. That's what I think of when I operate from a place of healing. Walks in the park, picnics, tubing down the river, horseback riding. I can't wait for someone else to create it for me. Sometimes I just go

take a blanket, take my little Bluetooth speaker, and lie in the grass. I love all types of music. I particularly like gospel, and I love jazz music, symphony, Bach, Beethoven. I like ambient noise, even just the sound of the birds. The deer here are huge, and just going outside and seeing their footprints, [I say to myself,] I see I'm occupying your land. The birds have all types of little nests in my backyard, and I just listen [to their song]—happiness doesn't cost a thing.

Nestled against a backdrop of luscious foliage that fills a warm and calming section of her home, Dr. Hunter-Fowler radiated warmth and smiles across our Zoom connection. She ended our conversation with advice we can all benefit from:

Don't compare your happiness with others. There's no such thing as perfection. You create that for yourself, and you are responsible for your own happiness. You must create your happiness for yourself. Anything is possible—go out and get it. You must get up, get out there, and go get it. Even if it's a homemade pizza. Go ahead and make it. Even if it's the muffins that you like to bake. Go ahead and bake them. Be happy.

These words align with what activist Karen Walrond calls “lightmaking,” which is defined as “any time you are led by your values to do purposeful action in the hopes of making the world brighter for other people.”¹²

This is activism. This is healing. This is resistance.

NOTES

1. Audre Lorde, *A Burst of Light: Essays* (Ithaca, NY: Firebrand Books, 1988), 130.
2. J Mase III, “To Be Black, Trans and Brilliant: Lourdes Ashley Hunter,” interview, Trans Women of Color Collective, July 29, 2014, www.twocc.us/to-be-black-trans-and-brilliant-lourdes-ashley-hunter/. (Also at HuffPost, “The Blog,” www.huffpost.com/entry/to-be-black-trans-brillia_b_5623511.)
3. Human Rights Campaign, *An Epidemic of Violence 2021: Fatal Violence Against Transgender and Gender Non-Conforming People in the United States in 2021* (Washington, DC: Human Rights Campaign, 2022).
4. Ibid.
5. Trans Women of Color Collective, “About Us,” www.twocc.us/about-us/.
6. Ibid.
7. See Nineequa Blanding, “What Is Healing Justice?,” in this edition.
8. Trans Women of Color Collective, “Healing And Restorative Justice Initiative,” www.twocc.us/our-work/healing-and-restorative-justice-initiative-hrji/.
9. Ibid.
10. Ibid.
11. Audre Lorde, *A Burst of Light*; and “Angela Davis On Radical Self Care,” Self Practice, transcript from Angela Davis Interview with Afro Punk, 2018, www.selfpractice.com.au/self-practice/angela-davis-on-radical-self-care.
12. Andee Tagle, “Life Kit: Activism doesn't have to be intimidating,” *NPR*, July 9, 2022, www.npr.org/2022/07/09/1110698797/life-kit-activism-doesnt-have-to-be-intimidating.

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