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# CATHERINE MEEKS

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## The Night is Long but Light Comes in the Morning

**MEDITATIONS FOR  
RACIAL HEALING**

**FOREWORD BY MICHAEL B. CURRY**

AUTHOR OF *LOVE IS THE WAY: HOLDING ON TO HOPE IN TROUBLING TIMES*

*The Night  
is Long but  
Light Comes in  
the Morning*

**MEDITATIONS ON  
RACIAL HEALING**

**CATHERINE MEEKS**



Morehouse Publishing  
NEW YORK

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Morehouse Publishing, 19 East 34<sup>th</sup> Street, New York, NY 10016

Morehouse Publishing is an imprint of Church Publishing Incorporated.

Cover design by Paul Soupiset

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data  
(to come)

ISBN 978-1-64065-597-3 (hardcover)

ISBN 978-1-64065-598-0 (ebook)

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## MEDITATION 5

### *Let's Talk About Rage*

We say no too often when asked about rage. It is not a good idea to refuse to engage with rage. After I moved to the Southeast as a young adult, rage visited me often and with great force. Among the many ways I accepted rage's invitation was one instance where I got a sack full of old red bricks and drove out to Fort Valley, Georgia, which has a lot of isolated farmland. I went to the most remote spot that I could find, got out my sack of bricks and a sturdy hammer, and began to beat on those bricks until I turned them into a pile of small rocks. It was a liberating experience because the truth will set you free, and rage was and is a part of my truth. It was good to find a way to acknowledge that rage that did not hurt me or anyone else.

What is rage, anyway? Rage can be characterized as a space where one is "constantly feeling impatient, irritated, and hostile." It's also been characterized as an intense feeling of passion.<sup>3</sup> Just as is true for all other emotions, rage is an energy that is fueled by many variables. All our experiences, both negative and positive, along with cultural conditioning and cultural narratives, play a part in shaping the inner community. Some of those experiences bring injury, grief, and other psychic impacts that lead to a deep sense of rage.

Clearly that rage intends to be acknowledged, and if it is not, it becomes destructive—it becomes a tool for the energy of negativity. It leads those who stay locked in it to fall into deep despair and

to seek less-than-positive ways to navigate their way forward. But when rage is channeled into a place where it can become a part of the change-making energy, the outcome is much different.

When rage is acknowledged and managed, either in the individual or in the collective community, it cannot function as a destabilizing, destructive force. But when people do not know what to do with rage, it is dangerous indeed. Unfortunately, rage has become confused with passion in people of color, to the extent that African Americans often make great efforts to not demonstrate rage or even anger.

During the turbulent 1960s, there was much concern about "black rage," and two psychiatrists, William Grier and Price Cobbs, even published a widely read book on the subject.<sup>4</sup> It was amazing to consider that African Americans might be enraged about having experienced enslavement and the subsequent marginalization, violence, and daily acts of oppression designed to keep them in their place of enslavement. In the white mind, all the structures that were designed to keep black people and other people of color in the places of subservience designated for them certainly should not have led to anger because that was just the way life was ordered. The world was constructed based on the power dynamics that favored white people, and it worked best when everyone adhered to that structure. There were many who even thought the Creator had something to do with this system.

White progressives were especially hurt by the expression of rage from African Americans because they were then and continue to be unconscious about the actual dynamics found in the African American struggle for liberation. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. voiced concern about the impact of white liberal unconsciousness



on the civil rights movement in his powerful *Letter from Birmingham Jail*.<sup>5</sup> As he argues in that amazing analysis, the white liberal could naively argue that the liberation process should go slower to accommodate white people's inability to engage in the change that was needed, but this was not helpful. He felt that such an attitude was harder, in general, to navigate than the attitude of an overtly racist, uncooperative white person.

One of the major problems with the gradualist notions of progressives (especially those who are often characterized as liberals) lies in the sense of betrayal that this generates in the oppressed. It is quite disconcerting to believe that someone is standing in solidarity with you in a cause, only to learn later that their position was not what it seemed. In addition, they have the audacity to explain why and how you should accept their position as you continue to live in the throes of oppressive, white supremacist structures. Why should the oppressed have to wait another minute for the oppressor to decide when to set the captive free? The rage that ensued around this and other aspects of white behavior, compounded by feelings of betrayal and deep disappointment, helped to fuel the fires of the 1960s, both figuratively and literally.

The young folks who dared to take to the streets and who began rocking the boat hard enough to toss out a lot of those who contributed to maintaining the status quo were seen as dangerous, and much energy and thought went into developing plans to stem that tide. The historical record reminds us of the savagery that was practiced against groups such as the Black Panthers and Black Muslims and their leaders, such as Fred Hampton, who was shot repeatedly while asleep in his house. No matter how devastating

the actions taken against these groups were, those actions were felt to be justified because the groups' rage had to be managed.

But that was then and this is now. At this moment, white rage has burst upon the scene as it did not during the 1960s. Of course, back then young whites were angry about the Vietnam War and other things, and not so much around race. In the twenty-first century, we are navigating a new wave of rage in whites that began before the election of Barack Obama but intensified during his presidency, and of course became even more fueled by the rhetoric and behavior of the folks in the era following Obama. Many whites seem to have felt a major sense of outrage because someone who was black was living in the White House and running the country.

Some of elected officials declared on the day of Obama's election their intention not to support anything that he would attempt to do. The mean spirit that began to walk the streets like a stalker continues to thrive today. All of us are being offered an opportunity to pay attention to it and to see what it has to do with us.

This type of energy is begging for a container. It is not helpful for it to be loose in the land, whether in white people or in people of color. It becomes helpful whenever it is harnessed and is focused upon an issue of some sort, when hopefully it will lead the enraged to a place of action instead of immobilization. Unfortunately, too often people respond to this rage by becoming immobilized or by falling into patterns of addictive behavior and deep despair.

We know that rage left unchecked will eventually explode, producing dangerous negative splinters. One type of splinter is our massive drug abuse culture. Another is the mental health crisis;

we have a serious problem when children not yet sixteen years old kill themselves because they have concluded that this world is too difficult to navigate. A third type was exemplified by the January 6, 2021, riot, when a group of people defamed the US Capitol to make a point about their rage at feeling left out by the powers that be. The very sad truth is that the people who stormed the Capitol are correct about being left out. They are often not considered when political deals are being brokered. In many ways they are put into a position similar to what African Americans and other people of color experience: they are deemed expendable. They became pawns in the power system that they thought they owned. No wonder they are enraged.

This short overview has looked at some of the ways in which our society makes it easier to live in a state of rage. This makes it harder to find places where passionate encounters—as opposed to rage-filled ones—can occur. The air seems to be filled with tension, and that makes it easier for seemingly less serious interactions to escalate into fatal violence. While it is not possible in a short meditation such as this to do an in-depth analysis of all the psychosocial causes of rage and the ways that it can be allowed to become negative, it is clear the intersection of inner rage and outer expressions of rage contributes to creating the culture of violence that has a long historical record in our country. Two of the most recent examples of what can happen when a person's inner rage collides with the rage permeating the culture are road rage and mass shootings.

However, when we begin to address our inner sense of instability and irritation, and distinguish that from day-to-day life in the outer world, it is possible to find ways to turn that energy into

a creative force. The work of discovery necessitates being willing to ask a few hard questions: What is the source of the irritation? Is it grounded in an attitude toward others, or in our attitude toward ourselves? Does it seem to have a beginning point, or is that an unknown? Is it attached to an event, incident, or personal experience? Is it related to a trauma of some type? Is how it manifests itself harmful in some way? Does that manifestation cause pain to you? Is it useful? Can you imagine life without it?

It may be necessary to seek a counselor or spiritual director to help you navigate this part of the inner journey. This will depend upon the depth of the rage that you are experiencing and how you have engaged it in the past. But it will be very advantageous to the individual and the collective community to do this work and to seek ways to channel the rage into passionate engagement with all parts of your inner self rather than simply allowing it to run wild in the streets of your inner community.

The rage of people who have been deeply wounded by racialized trauma is quite justified and understandable. But that rage still has to be managed, and assistance in navigating it is crucial as well. Unmanaged rage is not helpful for anyone and can do more harm than good for the person who harbors it. All who are rage-filled need to explore how it serves them and how and when it is a disservice.

## MEDITATION 27

### *More than an Ally*

Ponder this: If you were dying, who would you prefer to be accompanying you on the journey—an ally or a fellow pilgrim?

A fellow pilgrim is one who holds you in their heart and shares your pain and joy to the very best of their ability, no matter what it requires. This person is willing to walk in your shoes in order to understand how you see the world. The fellow pilgrim's commitment is to hold the difficult, regardless of what it costs to do so. There is no thought of abandoning the relationship, because it is clearly a connection at the soul level, and it will not be broken by external circumstances that might cause inconvenience.

The ally is quite a bit different. Allies have decided to unite with those in some type of struggle, and they have a variety of reasons for doing so. They will be present to the particular portion of the struggle that called them into it, but there may not be a soul-deep commitment that is grounded in true empathy. That empathy and commitment are essential to help create a space for sustainable racial healing.

While it is difficult to know or judge the exact process a person follows to arrive at a particular place in their life, clearly the process of deciding to be an ally is vastly different from that of deciding to be a fellow pilgrim. In my experience, it has seemed that becoming an ally is more grounded in the energy of transaction than transformation. But pilgrims take that next step. White people who have come to realize that racism has injured not only

black and brown people but themselves as well are becoming aware of their personal need for healing. In these cases, the active pursuit of a deep consciousness can spark an awareness that the work is not simply about standing with a person of color in a protest or an effort to achieve a particular justice-making goal, but also about getting well themselves.

The profound understanding of shared sickness when it comes to racism is the first step in the process of becoming a fellow pilgrim. We all are injured by racism. The great pilgrim Howard Thurman declared that "when we are giving to others, it is important to understand that we are working to get ourselves out of prison."<sup>20</sup> But it is difficult to come to that understanding if we have not yet realized that we are no better off than those to whom we offer our assistance. Even though we may have a few more economic resources, we share being impoverished in all of the other ways that human beings can be impoverished. As we embrace that reality, we can begin the journey toward liberation and healing, because giving generously requires being willing to move out of our comfort zone and try to respond to the real needs of the ones receiving our gifts.

When it comes to racism, too many whites find it difficult to see how racism has injured them. Their involvement in racial healing work is purely outer-directed, focused on people of color, who are deemed to be the only victims of this horrid system. If you accept that every person on the planet is injured by racism, you can see that it causes separation from other humans in a way that makes it quite difficult to see the face of God in one another, and that results in psychic and spiritual injury. No one is immune. Opening

our hearts and heads to this awareness, though painful, allows us entry into the arena of community as fellow pilgrims.

Being a pilgrim requires being willing to let go of privilege and many of the benefits of being white in the world. It means being more interested in being well than in being white. It requires white people to be willing to be uncomfortable as they observe the ways in which people of color and especially African Americans are treated. Being connected to people of color in that way creates pain for white people. There are times when sacrifices of white privilege will be called for in order to stand in solidarity as fellow pilgrims instead of being able to simply choose otherwise. There are times when the sense of security that accompanies white privilege may be diminished because a white person is deemed "less than" for standing with those who have long been characterized that way.

In order for white people to become fellow pilgrims, people of color have to be willing to allow them to enter into that space with them. This does not always happen, nor is it ever easy. It is difficult for many people of color to imagine themselves being truly connected to a white person because of the shared history that we collectively inhabit and the ways in which that history continues to shape the present. And there's not a lot of evidence that the vulnerability involved in taking off one's shoes to allow a white person to step into them is worth the risks involved.

When I went to Pepperdine University in 1968 as a young black woman who was not convinced that she would survive college or living in Los Angeles, I met the four white people I spoke about earlier who taught me the difference between a fellow pilgrim and an ally. These folks were student life personnel at the university,

and they were prepared to go many extra miles with me and other students of color. This was during the era of student protest and efforts to hold institutions accountable for their behavior. It was refreshing to find honest people who did not seem to think that I needed to be anybody except who I was. They were accepting of me, and they extended many acts of kindness toward me. I had never met or known any white people like them. They were courageous, willing to risk loss for my sake and the sake of the other African American students on campus.

I had no background with whites that could have helped me to understand these folks. They were white, but they were consistently the same every time I had any type of interactions with them. They made it clear in multiple ways that my well-being mattered to them, but this was not a case of selecting me as the “designated negro” to receive their graciousness; they were caring toward everyone, and they were willing to stand up for any and all of us who were trying to claim our rights as humans living in brown and black bodies. They demonstrated love as described in 1 Corinthians 13, but I did not realize that at the time. Back then, I was not able to think about race in relation to myself in the ways that I have come to understand that part of my journey now; on most days, I was simply trying to keep up with my classes, work, and family.

Reflection about the group I had encountered would come later, after their way of being proved consistent as the years passed, affirming them as people who were not simply stepping in and out of racial justice arenas when it was convenient; they stayed faithful, standing against racism wherever they found it. They remained supporters and mentors for more than fifty years, and they never wavered from being totally committed to wanting my life to be the



best that it could be. They were fellow pilgrims; these were folks that I want in the room with me on my day of dying.

Do you have fellow pilgrims on the journey with you? Are you aspiring to be a pilgrim or an ally?

## MEDITATION 31

### *The System Killed My Little Brother*

My little brother died when he was twelve years old, and he took my father with him. Though my father passed many years later, it was merely a belated announcement of a much earlier death.

As people often did in rural areas, my family responded to my brother's physical complaints with home treatments until it became clear that he needed more than they were able to do. When he was taken to the local hospital, they refused to treat him because poor black people were not welcome there. The only alternative was the "charity hospital" for poor folks and people of color, which was located in Shreveport, Louisiana, about seventy miles from our family home. It took a few hours to arrange transportation and to travel there, and by the time he arrived he had gone into crisis. A ruptured appendix cost him his life.

My father never recovered from his inability to save my brother's life. He was brokenhearted for the remainder of his life, and he passed it to any of us who would join him. As a child I joined him in that brokenheartedness simply because he was my father and I adored him and wanted to be as close to him as possible. Today, I continue to live in that space in many ways because it informs my understanding of how the work of racial healing can be most effective.

If one does not stand in solidarity with those who suffer, becoming not just an observer but also a brokenhearted fellow pilgrim, it is so easy to step into the illusion of being the one who can

fix someone or something, reinforcing the energy of superiority. This is a travesty, because that energy is part of what causes the suffering in the first place. Be the brokenhearted and you will see that the fixes are more complex.

Another opportunity to be brokenhearted came into my life when I was nearing the end of my college days. As a student at Pepperdine University in Los Angeles, I was provided a chance to stand up for justice in a way that I had never had before an incident on our campus that left a young black boy from the neighborhood dead.

The young man, Larry Kimmons, was killed by the campus security guard, a white man in his late seventies or early eighties who should not have been left with the task of providing security services for the campus in the rapidly changing environment of the late 1960s, given the many challenges to the status quo that were occurring. Larry Kimmons came from a wonderful single-parent household, and his mother had visited with the security guard to make sure that it was appropriate for him to be on the campus to play basketball, as the neighborhood youngsters enjoyed doing. But on the Wednesday evening when he was shot to death at point-blank range by the guard, a new narrative was launched about him.

That evening the youngsters came to play basketball and were told that the gym was closed because it was Wednesday night and the campus was shut down for Bible study. They inquired about waiting for the gym to reopen after Bible study; though this had not been a problem before, somehow on this day it became a huge issue, and the security guard decided to run them off the campus. Larry was reported to have tried to reason with him and to remind him that his mother had come to speak to him about the teenagers

being there. But the guard appeared to have forgotten about those conversations, or even that he knew the youngsters at all: he got his shotgun, aimed it at Larry, and shot him at close range. Larry died soon afterward.

Though this happened more than fifty years ago, the memory still lies in me at a cellular level. In fact, I have come to realize that much of my work is propelled by the desire to help make a world that does not need to feed off the blood of black children by refusing them medical care or shooting them down like snakes in the grass.

The events that followed this murder were devastating to all, and especially to black students. The administration did not want to send anyone to visit his mother nor did they want to assist in paying for his funeral. We were already enraged, frightened, and brokenhearted, and the break in our hearts grew larger as over the next days and weeks we witnessed people who professed to be followers of Jesus act as if the young life that had been lost meant nothing. Some went a step further and tried to characterize him as a good-for-nothing, a menace, or a vagrant—as if any of those would be a reason to kill him. It soon became clear to me that we were not talking about the same Jesus.

The long struggle to force the university to act in a more humane, honorable manner toward his family continues to be a part of many ongoing conversations today as some of us who are alumni work with the university to create an ongoing memorial to him. My cells will hold this memory, as they will the memory of Mrs. Clydie Kimmons's long, gut-wrenching scream at her young son's funeral. I pray never to forget that sound, because it helps me to remember that my work as an empowered, liberated person is to

make sure that no one rests from the work of racial healing until all of the structures that support the notion that black life is expendable have been

dismantled. It is a good reminder not to get lost in accommodating racism on any front and to spend each day trying to be open to the gift of courage enough to stay in solidarity with those who suffer on the margins. One potential trap we can fall into is that of becoming the "exceptional negro" or the "designated negro" or the only friend of color that a white person has managed to make. Allowing external forces such as this to shape our attitudes toward our siblings, whom racists deem worthy of continued oppression, makes it difficult to find true liberation. These forces themselves must be part of what we dismantle.

Being brokenhearted leads to clarity about our unwillingness to abide racist behavior. It is very disheartening to hear white people who are not trying to move beyond being allies try to explain acts of racist terror and other daily denigrations of people of color with oversimplifications instead of properly naming them. The energy generated from a broken heart will not engage with oversimplified ways of looking at the reality of what is happening in the lives of the oppressed as they strain under the weight of oppression and all the ways that it kills the body and injures the soul. It will not tolerate superficial answers to the real questions that must be answered by folks seeking to be liberated. Brokenheartedness is a prerequisite for truly becoming a fellow pilgrim and not simply an ally who can come and go from the resistance whenever it is convenient.

In many ways, brokenheartedness becomes a tool to assess the type of energy that whites are bringing to the racial healing

conversation. There has to be a fair amount of pain associated with being a white person who is trying to be conscious but has to face the truth of how the American experiment has become a place where so much of people's identity is grounded in indefensible notions about the connection between skin color and human value. There is but one remedy for this, and it lies in learning to differentiate between yourself as an individual and the collective. While this is a big challenge, it can be done—and until it is done, immobilizing energies will run wild in the streets of your inner community. One of the most profound lessons that any of us can learn is to separate ourselves from the collective even as we work to see how we are related to it.

Part of the difficulty with working in white spaces is how hard it can be to step back from such spaces and look at the situation with a wider lens. The tiny lens of self-absorption that imagines everything, including racial issues, from the perspective of "What does it have to do with me and my well-being?" is useless for anyone who is trying to be well. The white person who is trying to move along the path of overcoming personal racism will have to embrace the challenge of discerning what belongs in the category of personal concerns and what should be placed in the collective. Progressive whites have a fair amount of difficulty with this dynamic. The deep desire to be better than the rest when it comes to racism makes it difficult to name what needs to be named and to seek healing. The longer denial is engaged, the more comfortable it becomes to rest there, and the more difficult it is to move to new levels of awareness.

Clearly it is not any fun to experience a broken heart, but it is empowering to stay open to the process of engaging in suffering with others. If there is going to be any genuine, sustainable change toward racial healing, we must dismantle the constructs that restrict all who live in this land. When we allow our hearts to break for one another, a new dynamic of vulnerability can emerge that makes it possible to see in a new way. There are many points along the way when one can catch a glimpse of the new light of the morning, finally managing to outlive the darkness of the night. That light will be sustained by the continued willingness to walk in the shoes of another, especially those that are considered “other” among us.

**From the winner of *The President Joseph R. Biden Lifetime Achievement Award*, a spiritual guide to restoring yourself from racial trauma and committing to the long work of dismantling racism.**

Meeks has fought tirelessly to shed light on racism and to promote healing. In this new book, she shares stories from her journey and offers a much-needed meditative guide for the weary and frustrated.



**CATHERINE MEEKS**, PhD, is the retired Clara Carter Acree Distinguished Professor of Socio-Cultural Studies at Wesleyan College and the Director of the Absalom Jones Center for Racial Healing. She has long been a strong advocate for social justice, community, and wellness. She is the author of several books, including *Living into God's Dream* and *Standing on Their Shoulders: A Celebration of the Wisdom of African-American Women*.

## Marketing

- National publicity campaign including print, digital, radio, and TV
- 5-city book tour: NYC, Atlanta, Boston, DC, and Denver
- Trade, library, and Christian advertising
- Social Media campaign

Publication Date: November 22, 2022

List Price: \$24.95

Pages: 224 • Trim: 5.5 x 8.5

ISBN: 9781640655973



**Morehouse Publishing**  
NEW YORK