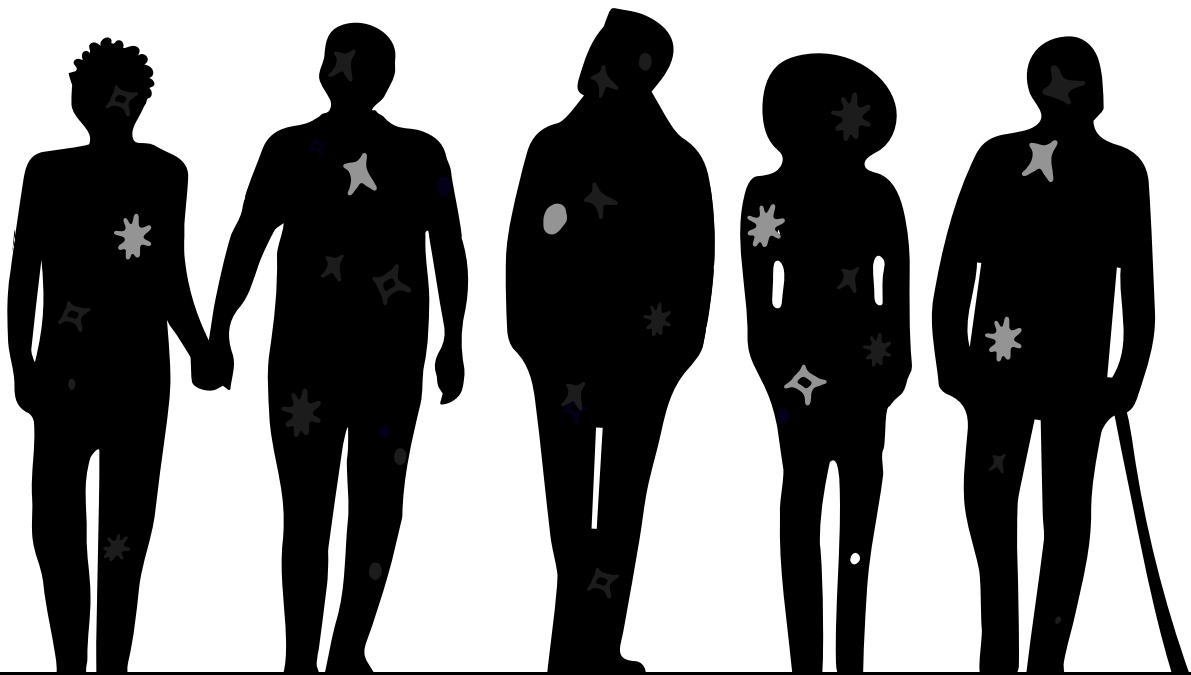


THE COSMIC WE

Episode 5:
Healing

with Dr. Barbara Holmes and Dr. Donald Bryant



from the CENTER FOR ACTION AND CONTEMPLATION

Barbara Holmes: I am a gardener, a lover of dark soil and rooted mysteries. The fact that flowers, herbs, and vegetables eventually burst forth from dampen seeds is always a wonder. Is also a joyful surprise when people who've been harmed to the extreme find peace and healing even while trauma continues. My anecdotal observations of my own community have convinced me that the roots of healing are deeply sewn by the same spirit that hovered over creation during the let there be transformation of the world. The shamans and root workers, the aunties and folk healers long gone, taught us that everything we needed to heal us was within our reach. Even salty tears could cure raw wounds if we could stand the pain.

What does healing look like for communities overwhelmed by ongoing trauma? How does communities survive? Those of us who are raised in communities under siege can tell you that there are many coping mechanisms. As one of the first steps toward healing and survival, we take a big gulp of reality. I mean, we have to admit that we've been broken before we can be healed. We can't heal until we grieve the events that have wounded us, release the spiritual toxins left behind, and open ourselves to something new. Communal grieving offers something that we cannot get when we grieve by ourselves.

Donny: From the Center for Action and Contemplation, I'm Donny Bryant.

Barbara: I'm Barbara Holmes.

Donny: And this is The Cosmic We.

Barbara: Dr. Donny, this has been going quickly, hasn't it? We're in chapter five already.

Donny: I know. Chapter five. I tell you, this has been an amazing journey. A lot of wisdom has been shared, processed, extrapolated from your book, Crisis Contemplation, and now we're at chapter five. One of the ways when I think about healing, and this is from a spiritual perspective, I begin to realize that, and I wanted to get your opinion on this, that the journey of life is really a journey back to wholeness. There's a Hebrew word called teshuva, which means to return back to your original. And if we consider that in the sacred text, the Holy Bible, that there's this concept of original goodness of all creation, that all creative things and creation and even human beings, that there was an original goodness that was declared upon that original creative intent. And to me, healing the journey of life, the good news of life is that there is an element of a return, that there is a journey, there's a return back to that original state for all of us. But the issue or the challenge that we face is that it is a journey.

Barbara: Oh my goodness. Yeah, I think that's what it's supposed to be. I mean, I don't think of birth as a beginning and death as an ending. We enter a stream that's ongoing when we enter it, and through that journey, you're going to have crisis, you're going to have chaos, you're going to have hurts and oppressions. All kinds of things are going to happen. It is like a segment of experience. And like you said, you're coming from wholeness on the spiritual side, you enter into this experiential stream and then you go out the other side back to wholeness. So it's a very wide open view, and I think I've always held that view because of my Gullah ancestors who, you know, that veil

between this side and the other side, was very, very thin. Folk came back and forth to warn you, to guide you.

We talked to folks who were dead in our dreams. So we always saw life as this brief, very brief experience as part of a hole that was shrouded in mystery. So healing, I think, emits from that realm of mystery. And I started the chapter with the story of my friends Dedon and Belvy, and this is the quote that starts the chapter, “May our individual tears moisten the soul of our common humanity, germinating seeds of hope, compassion and mercy that will blossom and heal our collective suffering.” I met Dedon in Belvy in San Francisco when I was lecturing and just developing the book, *Race and the Cosmos*. They were wise elders. Dedon is now an ancestor. And the story that evokes the mystery and what healing is comes from their wedding. They met at the same time that I met Dedon, she met Dedon. We were on a radio show and he heard her voice and just was fascinated and looked her up and found her.

And they began dating and they were both seniors at the time. And they fell in love and flew to Africa, to West Africa, to get married in Ghana. But when they got there, Belvy was so overcome with the historical trauma that resides in that place when she visited the slave dungeons, that she couldn't stop crying. Now this is supposed to be their wedding. They've got all these folks gathered, and Belvy is having a complete breakdown in tears. And it goes on and on until Dedon finally says, after a day or two, what would healing look like? And so that became the question that helped me to frame some conversation around healing. What does healing look like?

Donny: That question is a question that I think we can all sit with on a personal level, but also at a communal level. You make an observation and maybe actually, I don't know if it's Dedon in the book, that one of the first steps toward healing and survival is to really take a big gulp of reality. In other words, to get to the point where you can admit that you're broken or that we are broken as a whole village, as a community. And that this admission of brokenness or admission that there is trauma is essential before we can begin the journey or the process of healing.

Barbara: Yeah. And it's not something that you can do by yourself. Of course you can grieve alone when you suffer individual losses, but when you're in the midst of a catastrophic loss, like the transmission of slaves from Africa shores to the Americas, that's a collective grieving and that's what Belvy was caught up in. She was caught up in historical trauma. And so it's impossible to grieve historical trauma all by yourself. And it is Malidoma Somé's wife, Sobonfu Somé, who says, “Through validation, acknowledging and witnessing communal grieving allows us to experience a level of healing that is deeply and profoundly freeing.”

So when you get to these catastrophic issues that affect whole communities, you, you're just not going to be able to lament that all by yourself. You need a group of people to hold you in the midst of that, to witness your grief and to share theirs and to acknowledge what has happened. I think some of the things that are happening in Florida now are an attempt to erase historical trauma. Our governor has decided that African Americans shouldn't know about their history and that young white children shouldn't have to feel ashamed of what's happened to people of color in this nation.

So they shouldn't learn about it either. And that's complete erasure, part of the grieving process. Part of the healing process. If we are ever going to come together as a nation, we are going to have to admit that something happened.

Donny: When we begin to understand as you're indicating that our healing, individual healing is for all of humanity, that the cultural healing and that there is a connection. And you discussed this in your book, and you asked the question, how does our culture play a role in our communal healing and even our personal healing? So could you expound on that? Because you elaborated on that there is some interconnectedness there. So it's not just a diametrically opposed thing that you know, take care of yourself here, but that there may be a role that culture plays. There may be a role that the interconnectedness between government and communities and villages, that there is some interconnected. Could you speak about and elaborate on that just a little bit more?

Barbara: Yeah. They're finding that culture is intricately involved in healing. That there are groups of people who do not heal because they lay on a couch and talk to a psychiatrist. There's nothing wrong with talk therapy. It can be very, very therapeutic and useful in certain circumstances. But it has not been as helpful dealing with historical trauma. And in fact, what works in those instances is ritual ceremony. The example I use in the book is of Native Americans, and basically it's the enactment of the body, the release of the trauma in the body through sweat lodge, through dancing through powwow that helps to heal historical trauma. It's the comfort, certain cultural ways of doing things. All hell could be breaking out. But if my grandmother would start making crab cakes in the kitchen and boiling cabbage, everything was going to be okay. Because you couldn't do anything about what was going on outside, but you could still make your crab cakes.

So you did what you could, what was at hand and you did it in ritualistic ways. And each culture has their own rituals. I think the story I tell in the book is about a time when I was in Miami, and I may have told this story before, but it really imprinted me because one of the hospitals in Miami allowed shamans on their floors. And so they had medical doctors in white coats and they had shamans and people with chickens and people dabbling blood everywhere, and humming and drumming and powwowing and everything was going on. And I was going to volunteer with the chaplain's office. I had not yet been to seminary, and I went to the head chaplain. He said, "Why are you asking me? Everybody just goes upstairs and does whatever they want to do. So if you want to do something, go do it." And I just went upstairs and watched. I didn't have the experience or the understanding to know what I was looking at. But what I was looking at was culture as medicine, culture as a pathway toward healing.

Donny: As you talk about culture as medicine or culture as a pathway, there are two things that really stood out to me that stayed with me from this chapter. Number one, regardless of the mechanism, the vehicle or the pathway that the ultimate roots of healing are intrinsically connected to spirit. You elaborate that, and I think that's really important for us to share with our listeners because you

may have various practices, you may have various liturgical experiences, you may have certain ceremonial expressions, but ultimately the roots, the source right of all healing is connected to God. That was one of the most important things that stayed with me from your work in this chapter. And I just wanted to know if you wanted to speak to that, Doctor B, because we can get lost in the ceremony. We can get lost in sometimes the specifics, the cultural expressions are important, but if we don't recognize that ultimately the roots of that, the roots of the source of the healing is ultimately and always connected to spirit.

Barbara: Yes. And it's not tied to one particular idea of who God is either. If you remember Howard Thurman's healing and connection came as he sat by a tree, a particular oak tree, that he always was centered when he was near it and he was connected to it. So I mean, the idea of what spirit is and who spirit is and who God is pretty vast. But that would be right because the reality of God is pretty vast. And so you're offered an opportunity to allow mystery to lead, to allow spirit, to guide you toward a healing that you can't imagine. Your ideas of healing are so limited, and healing comes in all kinds of forms and all kinds of ways. And sometimes the pathway to healing is through brokenness, disaster, chaos, and harm.

Donny: And leads me to this other observation, the hope that we have in our healing, the hope for the healing, it always rests in the multiplicity of gifts as you state that are intrinsic within the community or within the village, within the family, within the tribe, within the culture that you are a part of. And I think that's an important observation because you say you listen, there's a multiplicity of unique manifestations of gifts that could participate in your healing. And you indicate that some will pray, that some may resist, some may have the gift of teaching, some people may have the gift of listening, the gift of advising, the gift of loving compassionately. And all of those gifts, depending on where you are on the journey, will be available for us, that we will have access to as we journey through this life tshuvaling, right?

Barbara: Right. But there is a question that looms that I'm not sure I'm able to resolve at this point, but I ask it anyway. What does healing mean when the trauma never ends, when every generation must confront the same monsters of oppression? So what are we talking about here? We heal a little bit. We go through the civil rights movement and we heal from the various things that occur and the people who die and who are assassinated. And then the next generation has to march again as Black lives matter, dealing with new oppressions. So the same oppressions in a new guise. So what does healing mean? Is there such a thing as healing? I mean, exactly what is it that we're trying to get done? Are we just trying to get a little relief and we're calling that healing? So what is healing?

Donny: I mean, you're right. This may be a question that can't necessarily be resolved in a simplistic manner. This is a very complex matter that we're dealing about. We're talking about emotions and trauma and generational pain, but maybe there's some insight to what you're suggesting in this work. There are times when I do weddings, one of the things I've concluded in my own life, personal

journey, Dr. B, is I try to help people process with their own relational and communal and village trauma. I started to see something differently. And so when I give people a model and I say, well, what is marriage? What's your definition of marriage or relationships or how do we journey together in community and life on an ongoing basis? And my definition, Dr. B was this, it's when two or more people choose to intentionally participate in one another's healing. When two or more people choose intentionally, not casually, but there is a recognition of brokenness on the other, brokenness within myself.

And I choose to use the gifts that are within me and within our circle, within our village to play a particular role. My role may be to, as you say, pray. My role may be, Dr. B, to love compassionately, whatever my unique role is. But there is a village concept here. It's not just one or the other. It's that we play a role in each other's healing. And maybe if we see it that there's an organic process that this tshuva, this return, it is guided by spirit, as you said, the source of it, the roots of it is spirit. And it's something that we may not have a particular blueprint. I can't say Dr. B, this is how you get your healing, jump up five times.

Barbara: Some of the tent ministries tried to tell us.

Donny: Give 10% to the church, and you get your healing.

Barbara: You'll get your true healing.

Donny: Maybe it's not that simplistic, maybe can't systematize it, but there is a path. There is a path. And this is where the contemplative journey is really critical because there has to be a mechanism, a vehicle for us to be able to reconnect back to that which is indestructible, that which is real, that which is authentic. And I think what you're suggesting is that we have a lot of... Culturally, there are various ways that we accept culturally and maybe even within our religious traditions, there are certain pathways that we have canonized to be able to help facilitate that. Even in the field of medicine, even in the field of medicine. But the question is when there is generational trauma, when there is generational pain, when there has been generational oppression, when there are stories and narratives that have been... And you speak about this, and maybe this should be where we go next. There are stories that have been adopted. You call them, call them stock stories, I believe you call them stock, S-T-O-C-K. Stories that have been handed down about me, and about you, and about others.

When there is generational trauma, when there is generational pain, when there has been generational oppression, when there are stories and narratives that have been, and you speak about this, and maybe this should be where we go next, there are stories that have been adopted. You call them stock stories, I believe you call them stock, S-T-O-C-K, stories that have been handed down about me, and about you, and about others. And maybe, Dr. B, you can speak to some of these stories, these narratives. How do stories play a role in our healing or difficulty becoming healed?

Barbara: Well, the first thing I do, I mean there are many pathways toward healing, and I couldn't possibly deal with all of them. But in the context with within that we're

working with, I identify three. And the first is the recovery of memory and story. Second, the revival of culture and ritual. And finally, the interpretation of our trauma through the lens of our joy. So those are three specific pathways. Because I didn't want to talk about healing in some happy-go-lucky panacea. Oh, if we all do this, we're all going to be okay. We're not going to be okay, probably. And we still have to be okay. We still have to keep going. And so, one of the pathways toward healing that have helped people of color and culture is telling the stories. Telling the stories. And the stock story idea comes from Professor Leanne Bell.

And she identifies several kinds of stories that people tell. And you can imagine immediately when you say stock story, think of the American dream. That Americans are good, they've always been good, God bless America, and nobody else. That whole mantra. That's a story that gets told. But there are counter stories. They're called concealed stories, and they're told by people who are on the margins who don't fit into that stock story. It speaks to the power of their culture. And I use Langston Hughes, *A Dream Deferred* as a real example of a counter story to the American dream mythologies. And the final category are the resistance stories. So actually the final is the third. There are four. The resistance stories are stories of the heroism of individuals, and we have lots of those. But the problem with those stories is it elevates single individuals like Superman or Superwomen.

Everybody loves the story of Harriet Tubman running through the woods, saving everybody all by herself. But they don't ever talk about Haiti's communal rebellion where she beat back, that country, beat back the forces of colonization all by herself, the British, the French, she won that war with Toussaint Louverture. And the final category are the stories that transform. These are the pockets where we put our imagination and we transcend by just dreaming. What would America look like if the founding ideas and documents that espoused equality and all of that, what would happen if those stories were actually fulfilled? How can you imagine that being fulfilled when the founders were slave holders writing about the equality of all human beings? So that's where you put a category where you've got to imagine some newness before you could inhabit it.

Donny: So Dr. B, are we at a point now in history, are we at a point in our culture, not just American culture, but even global culture where we are open to the emergence of new stories or emerging stories? Are we at a point where we're receptive to that as a whole? Are we at that point where there's a breakthrough, where newness is taking place?

Barbara: Well, because newness is the work of the spirit, you can't hold it down. You can't stop it from emerging. But if you ask me the politics of our nation at this point, no, nobody wants any newness. They want to resurrect the past. They want to maintain their statues. They want to go back to a time when separation was legal. They want to erase the reality of oppression from education. So no, I don't see them embracing newness or new immigrants or new people or new ideas. I don't. But those ideas are emerging anyway. The spirit doesn't need permission from us to break out. And when that happens, the world shifts, paradigms change, and you see things in a completely different way. I mean, the thing about stories is you get to change them as you go. One of the things about African griots, the storytellers, they were the keepers of the

stories.

They didn't tell stories the way we think they ought to be told. They didn't have morals in the end, there was a trickster element. Sometimes the good guys weren't so good, and sometimes the bad guys weren't so bad. They would change the endings, they would change the outcomes because for them, story was a living communication between people sharing their lives together. I like what you said about marriage being the intentional participation in the healing of another. But the only problem with that, Donny, is when you date somebody, everybody's faking, ain't nobody telling the truth about how broken they are, because if they did, nobody would marry the other person.

Donny: True.

Barbara: So when you say you're going to participate in the healing, healing, usually you don't know how deep that participation is going to be, what you're going to have to do, the tears you're going to have to shed. And so you really entering into a union by faith because you don't know who you're marrying ever.

Donny: You're totally right. One of my favorite definitions of faith, it actually comes from Father Richard Rohr where he... And we've had this conversation on our podcast where he says, "The opposite of faith is not doubt." The opposite of faith, at least my interpretation of what he said was, is control. And which means your need to maintain a certain level of control over people, your need to maintain a certain level of control over opinions and outcomes is an indication as you just stated, of a lack of faith or a deficiency in our faith. And you can see that in our relationships, right? Because if I don't fully understand your personality or you or your trauma, and it causes me the type of uncomfortableness that I makes me want to consider it, whether this is right, that's control.

And I think we all love certainty. I think that's what he called, he called a certitude or certainty. So we all love a certain level of certainty. But to truly walk by faith, as you're stating, is to relinquish that, is to surrender, to gently release that perceived right to be in control. And I don't know, I mean this is where some degree healing is directly connected to that. Your ability to exist in the realm of faith, the realm where there is uncertainty or as you call it, mystery unknown. And we don't welcome that, generally speaking.

Barbara: Oh, absolutely not. You just have to take certain things by faith. I mean, I've had so many things happen for which there is no explanation. And a healing occurred, and this is what I think happened to the evangelical movement. They decided to turn that into a brand. The spirit moves were the spirit moves. I had an accident when I was moving to Florida and I broke the cord in my thumb in when I dropped a package on it, and I went to an ortho guy and the guy said, "Oh, look on the x-ray, the cord that allows your thumb to move is severed. We could go and operate, but we're not sure." Scar tissue, blah, blah, blah. And so I said, "Okay." He said, "You're not going to be able to move that thumb, but you know, have nine other fingers." And I said, "No, that's not going to happen."

And I began to just try to move the thumb. I prayed about it, and one day we were in the car and my thumb moved, you shouldn't have moved. There was no cord to make it move. And I started screaming, "George, George, my thumb moved." And he was like, "Huh, what are you talking about?" And so, okay, is that a healing? Maybe, I don't know. Maybe there's a regeneration of the muscles or something. Who knows? But you can't turn that into a whole religion expecting miracles every day, expecting bizarre happenings every day. And I think they started off with the power and the majesty of healing that occurs spontaneously, unexpectedly. And then they wanted to expect it and predict it, and channel it and get tithes and offerings as a result of it. And the spirit lifts. That's not going to happen. So if we can embrace the ambiguity, if we can embrace the love of the spirit that leads us, if we can just accept with joy, these healings that occur when we least expect them, we'll be better off.

Donny: I noticed Dr. B, that you made an intentional decision in this chapter not to leave us with any specific suggestions for practice or meditations, things to reflect on. You left that open. What were your thoughts around that decision?

Barbara: I was pretty clear that healing is not a practice that you can just do and expect outcomes. It's a process. Sometimes it's instantaneous, sometimes it's not. But it's always at the will of the Holy Spirit. And besides, as I looked over the chapter, I realized I'd given all the practices that anybody would need as you go. And in that last segment, when we talk about performing joy, that is a practice because what I'm saying is you have to seek healing, accept healing while the trauma continues to afflict you. You can't wait and hope that this will end, that the oppression will end, and then you can heal. You got to find your healing on the fly. You got to take it where it could be found. And I give a ritual for doing this. I say there are things we can do to find and perform our joy while we're still under pressure, while we're still being oppressed.

And I say, we can reconnect to the earth, grow our own food, recognize our embeddedness in the natural world. We can realize that we are being induced to accumulate as much stuff as anybody could possibly want. And it's foolish. There's nothing we brought in the world and nothing we can take with us. And finally, I say, we can rely on the healing effects of joy. And sometimes joy doesn't look right to folks who are observing it. I talk in joy unspeakable about the young people dancing at the funerals of the slain. Slain young black men by police officers. And they would jump out of the funeral cars and hip hop music would be streaming out of the cars, and they would dance as if their very lives depended on it. And then they would jump back into the cars and head to the cemetery. And people who didn't understand thought, "Why are they so happy that their friend died?"

Well, they're performing joy as a resistance to the system. It's the counterintuitive creative move. They're going to dance because they're going to have joy that the Lord said, world can't give it and the world can't take it away. And so they're doing something in the face of oppression that they can't stop. They can't limit it. All they can do is say, you can't touch the faith that we have. You can't touch the love we have for one another. And you can't destroy our community no matter what you do. So that's a performance of joy. One example. So if you look through the chapter, there's all kinds of ways that you can practice healing without me prompting you. Sometimes

you don't want the choir to have to prompt you to get up and clap, and you want to be able to find a way toward healing on your own.

Donny: I love that. I'm glad you brought that up, Dr. B. Is this the aspect of joy and performing joy. Because there is a distinction that I think sometimes very nuanced and sometimes we don't really recognize that there is a distinction between happiness and joy. And you speak to that in the book, and I think it's maybe as we get ready to land this plane, maybe we can help our listeners understand better the difference between performing joy and maybe performing happiness. You're the expert on this, but I want to get your thoughts about this.

Because for me, maybe I come from a theological or scriptural biblical perspective. Sometimes joy has roots biblically and scripturally. There's a lot of texts that deal with rejoicing in the Lord and in finding joy. And it is juxtaposed with the temporal aspects of happiness, with the maybe conditional nature of happiness. And maybe Dr. B, you can canvas your view of this because it may help us as individuals on this journey, this journey back to wholeness or journey to healing, being able to reconcile this idea of performing joy in a way that may be foundational to this journey.

Barbara: Yeah. Happiness is transitory and often very personal. Joy requires authenticity. You have to do a few things. If you are a bipod person, you have to stop performing the blackness that whiteness created, the stereotypes, the secret keeping. Often you have to sing yourself sane, dance yourself free, because every act of public joy is one step closer to the risky leap toward transcendence. Here's the part that sounds bizarre, but I find it to be true. We have to allow joy to generate jobs and alternative avenues of labor. We've got a journey beyond the mandates of imperialism, capitalism, colonization, and competition.

Joy can produce jobs, because when in your community you are settled within yourself, you have a space within that you all can go into together. You find ways of expressing your gifts, the gifts that you were talking about, Donny, you find ways of expressing your gifts in ways that will allow you to be part of an economic system that gives you and others joy. The space for healing is sacred, as this is what I think. And I want to offer as part of the closing. A quote from Reagan Jackson, who writes that, in response to white people asking people of color what they can do to help, how they can participate, how they can be better allies. And there are many ways to do that. But what Jackson says is, "We live in a toxic environment." So the idea of taking a few hours to gather together with other people of color, not to discuss race, not to fuss about white people, but to simply disengage from society's problems, to dance and laugh, remember our own humanity.

That's truly powerful. And the very best way that white people can show their allyship is by not interrupting that time, by not centering their needs to feel included or their desires to help. To see the communal sacred space as a space that does not need to be interrupted or invaded, to support it in every way possible is one of the ways that allies can strengthen their position with communities under siege. I'll close with this. As we sit with what is, and what never should have been, our feet remember the call of the drums, and we allow the spirit within to soar. More healing is needed, Dr. Donny.

Donny: More healing. Well, Dr. B, wonderful, wonderful conversation. Really appreciate you. And if I could just, I want to summarize that joy, performing joy, what I hear in your explanation of that, I hear joy is a choice that can be made by all. Happiness is something that is temporary and is often pursued, but we can choose intentionally because joys of the heart and happiness is typically based upon external dynamics that are conditional. But to have a deep understanding of the roots of where the source of joy that is disconnected from material things, disconnected from things that have to go our way. When you have that understanding, when you allow yourself to be able to sit with the well of peace, the well of opportunity, the well of wisdom that is often as you indicate within the village, the intrinsic gifts that are there. There's something that we can tap into. The resources are there to be able to perform, to experience, to live in, to sit with joy.

Barbara: Yes, we have everything we need for healing. It's within our reach.

Donny: What a beautiful conversation about healing. What does healing look like? Healing is complex. Healing has challenges. There are benefits in healing. Healing offers, promises. Healing is a journey. I think for me, the conclusion that I really want everyone to be left with from this conversation is not only exploring what does healing look like, but more importantly, what does healing look like for you?