

FOR THE APOLOGY

FROM FARAH TANIS, BLACK WOMEN'S BLUEPRINT



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THE RIGHT TO AN APOLOGY



The Right to an Apology:

Survivors have the right to an authentic apology for the violence and pain wrought on their bodies, minds and spirits.

Holding Space:

To hold space is to be present and contain the immediate and continuous energetic shift created when another breaks with silence. It is being there, present for another. It is to act as a stand, bear witness, create and sustain physical and emotional safety, and to nurture trust at the same time.



My Dear Sister,

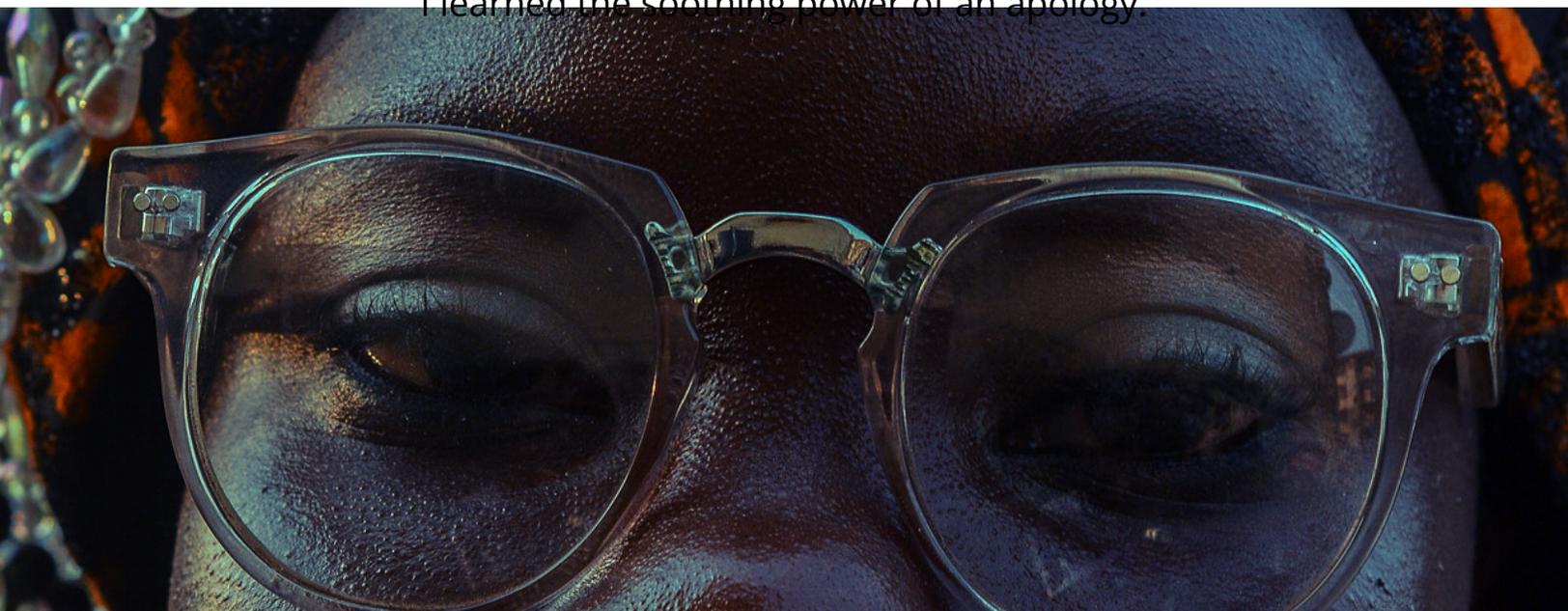
Eve my brave courageous brilliant spiritual warrior, I have been overcome with love and grief and compassion and reverence as I am reading the words you've let loose on these pages. Oh my God/Goddess in heaven I am half way through and my stomach is in knots. My head is full. My eyes won't stop crying. My bones are aching. I am home. I stayed home to finish this work of grace and opening toward profound transformation. Are you okay in the aftermath of this? Are you breathing in the aftermath of this? Are you replenishing? Are you taking care of yourself my dear sister? I am sending you lots of love and continued strength. Thank you for challenging us to look our pain dead in the eyes and demand from him/her/them what we know we are owed: truth, acknowledgment, a reckoning, justice, and finally to heal and have peace. If as children we couldn't live in another type of world, one where we were safe, then Eve as tired as we get, we have no choice but to build that world now. Even if it's the last thing we do.

Farah

Holding Space for Survivors and Apologies

At the culmination of the Black Women's Truth and Reconciliation Commission on Sexual Assault in 2016, I took a trip to South Africa powerful beyond words. It left me forever transformed as a survivor and an activist in the struggle to end sexual violence, a struggle which too often feels like a zero sum game. As we met South African women, who each in turn shared with us how they refused to allow violence, shame and rage to kill them, I and others engaged in a process of holding space. The South African women talked about South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission, its failures, successes and mostly its significance. They talked about apologies, those spoken and received and those accepted without ever being heard. With these South African women, we sat, listened and talked in community. These were Black women, South African women and we who bore witness were a mixed group of people of all races, all genders, class and ethnicity, and we were from the U.S. Most of us did not live through the violence these women survived. Still, we were all survivors of something. If not rape itself, we were survivors of a spectrum of sexual violence. We were also survivors of patriarchy, white supremacy and survivors of migration fleeing decimated countries. We were survivors of poverty and survivors of imperialism and colonization. In that listening space, I learned what it meant to truly hold space like I'd never done before. Despite our diverse backgrounds and ideologies, despite agreement or inability to wrap our minds around the ways these truth-telling women continue to forgive when apologies are not offered, I learned to bear witness to apologies embodied, curated, ancestral and experiential. I stepped into the sharing of emotional turmoil, grief, healing and forgiving which can still thrive in the middle of rage wrought by violence.

I learned the soothing power of an apology.



Apologies Don't Have to Be Spoken

"No one ever gave me an apology" is what one of the women in South Africa said to me: "I was raped again and again by someone meant to love and protect me, but I knew that hearing an apology from this rapist would not be what healed me."

Apologies don't have to be spoken is what I learned. They don't have to be offered, in order for us to offer forgiveness to ourselves, if to no-one else. In South Africa I shared sacred space with those who offered forgiveness without receiving apology. I learned that this was a process of reclamation—reclaiming the self and community. This beginning of learning began when I met Mmatshilo Tumelo Motsei, a spiritual healer, brave truth-teller, activist author of "The Kanga and the Kangaroo Court: Reflections on the Rape Trial of Jacob Zuma". There in South Africa, it began when she honored us as visitors, with her own story and we wrapped our arms around each other.

Mmatshilo who holds support groups for men in the prisons of South Africa—harm doers rejected and imprisoned by society—spoke of family, community and violence. She spoke of ancestral bones, ritual and sacred journeys to forgiveness, without a single apology ever being uttered to her. When I could get moments alone, I cried with abandon. I reminded myself to breathe, deep, painful, victorious breaths. I reminded myself that we are still alive, and I reminded myself that in so many spaces where conversations about forgiving persons would be taboo, where forgiving without apology would be mistaken for weakness, and the choice chastised by community and by social justice activists, it was ok in that specific moment, in South Africa to speak of forgiving even those who show no remorse.



Types of Apologies

In my journeys as an activist I've come into contact with survivors who've spoken of their experiences with apologies which have fallen into the following categories.

Authentic apologies – Apologies made with empathy, remorse, accountability and accompanied with repair.

Insincere apologies – Apologies in words only, with no empathy, no acknowledgement of hurt, or responsibility.

Dutiful apologies - Apologies made because it is expected.

Forced apologies – Apologies made under threat or duress, in order to avoid punishment or loss.

Selfish apologies – Apologies given which are self-serving, self-relieving, manipulative or to control someone else's feelings or actions.

Embodied apologies – Apologies through demonstration of remorse, showing and behaving with empathy, responsibility and acts of repair.

Curated apologies – Apologies that are intentional, thoughtful and purposefully brought into existence through speech, art, design or other action. These apologies require investigation and imaginative courage and they can be brought into being by the harmed.

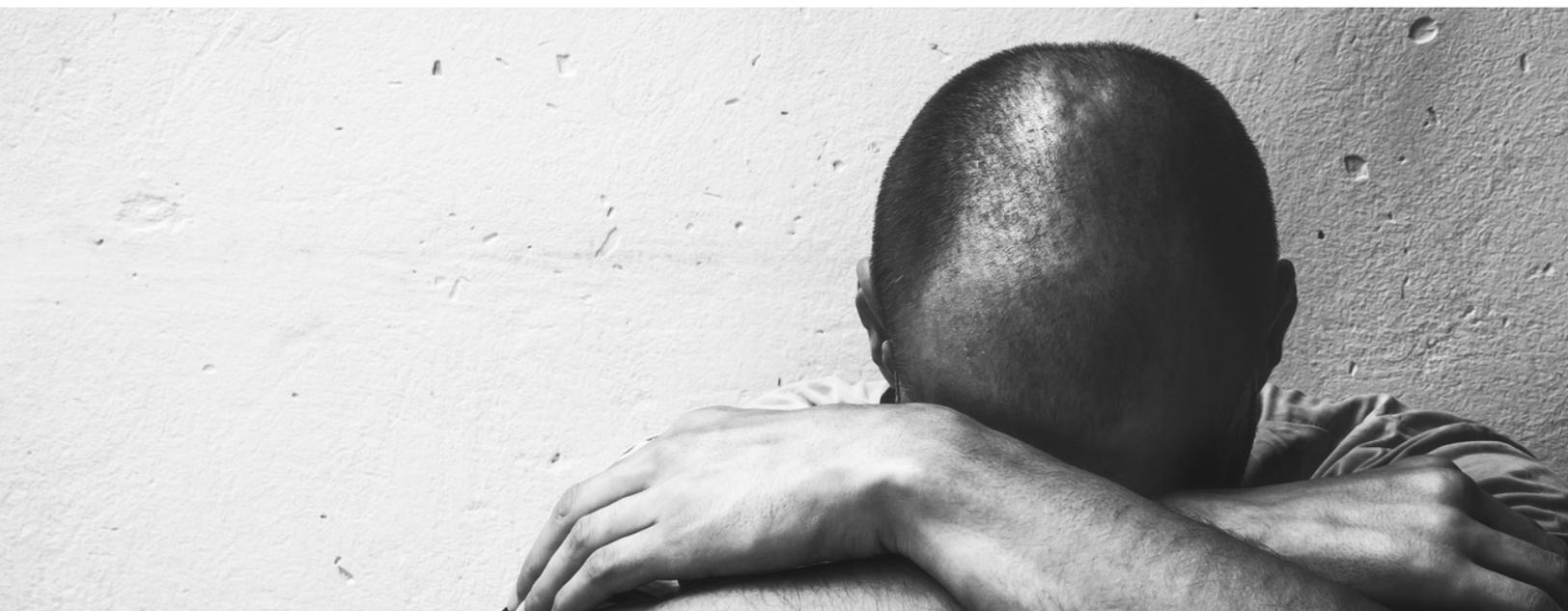
Liberatory apologies – Apologies that engage a continuum and a process of freeing the harmed and the harm-doer; all encompassing, these apologies free the mind, body and spirit from the pain of harm done and harm endured, toward the articulation of forgiveness.

Ancestral apologies- Apologies allowing one to speak with, to confront the dead and reconcile with those no longer living, in order to heal harms that continue to live-on beyond the passing of the harmed or harm-doer. These apologies allow a process of healing in both directions. It heals toward the past and toward the future.

Experiential apologies - Apologies experienced through memorials, sites of memory or sites of conscience. It can mean going back to where harm was committed. Returning to the space of trauma does not have to mean journeying to a physical location, it's also about memories living in the body.

Apologies Break the Heart a Little More

If my father ever apologized to me in his own words, my heart would break. The wave of grief which would wash over me would be more than the grief I felt each time my father beat me. There are few things more painful or more liberating than to hear an apology from a loved one, who has profoundly hurt us or caused harm. It must be the process of accepting the apology that makes it so painful to hear, because it involves fully acknowledging the suffering we endured. To bring to full consciousness that we survived suffering, evokes a self-compassion that automatically deprives the raging fires inside us of the air that feeds it. Accepting an apology is to reach an altered state. Apologies when truly authentic and when truly received can tear the anger out of us. Moreover, the empathy expressed in an apology can trigger a cycle of mutual empathy between the harmed and the harm-doer, setting in motion processes for restoration and reconciliation.



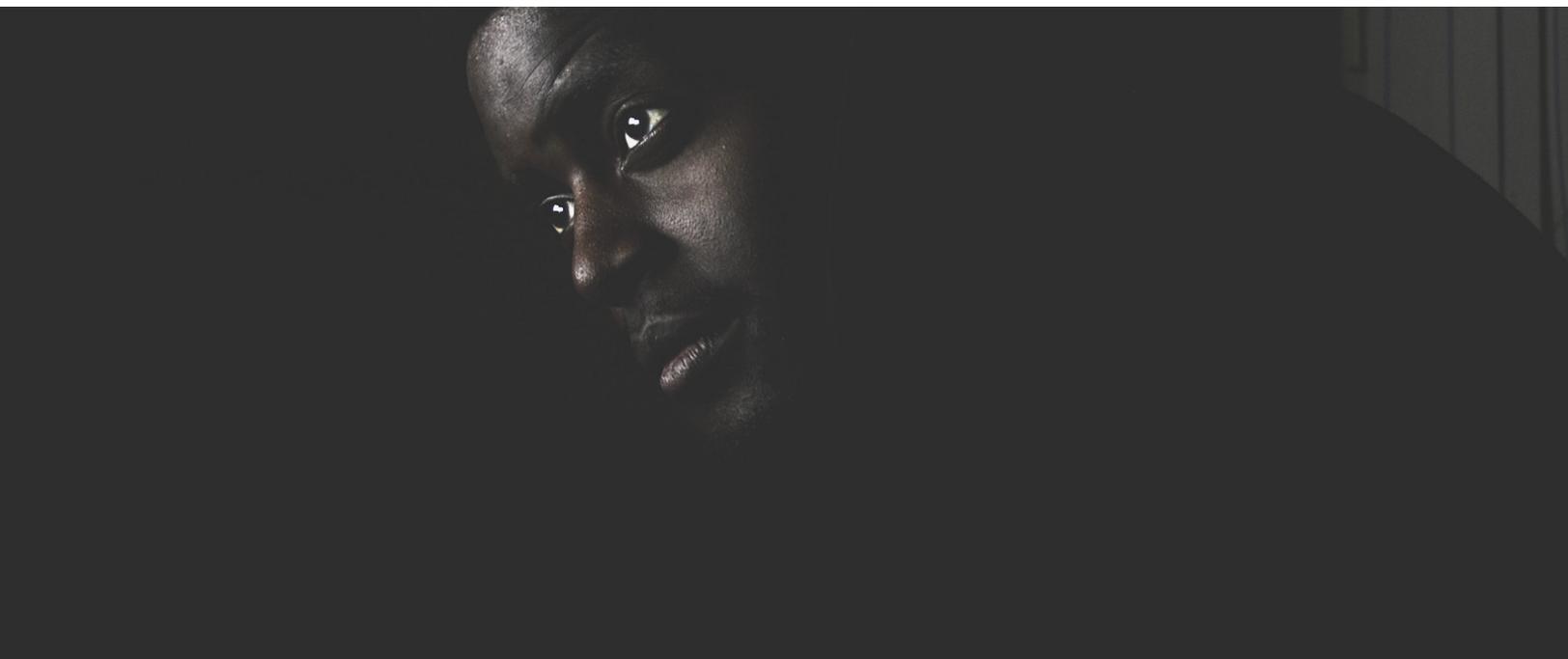


**“YOU CAN’T MEND
WHAT YOU CAN’T
FACE”**

**-JAMES BALDWIN VIA
TONI CADE BAMBARA.**

When Harm-Doers Withhold Apologies

We are meant to live in community. That is our inheritance as human beings. We are meant to live in harmony and interconnectedness, not as broken human beings who then proceed to break other human beings. In this world, men across identities are especially discouraged from living in harmony and interconnectedness. The world intentionally seeks to deprive men of this life-giving experience. So when men harm others, and don't apologize, they forfeit the universal inheritance of joy and connection. They choose to remain broken and contorted out of shape, wasting precious time which can be used to speak with loved ones, to make amends, to apologize, to self-determine alternative ways of being a man, to define healthy masculinity and humility. They miss the opportunity to fully know existence without violence and love without prerequisites or conditions.



FROM APOLOGY TO REPAIR



I encourage harm-doers to bravely engage in any expression of remorse. Grab hold of even the most remote possibility for the liberation that comes through repair. Leap at the chance to free yourself from the lethal patriarchal ideology and related internal havoc that can often keep men full of false-pride, misunderstanding and a sad definition of manhood.

Windows of opportunity exist everywhere for you to engage in reparative conversation about harms committed, about a gender-justice which also centers you, and your release from self-imposed chains of violence. Hold yourself accountable by claiming your own humanity and freedom from male supremacist legacies of self-enslavement and violence.

If you have not yet taken the necessary steps to apologize to someone you have hurt, this is your moment.

Follow the apology continuum: Notice, know or realize you have caused harm to someone else, sit with how noticing or knowing you caused harm makes you feel, put aside pride, self-indulgence, excuses, or win-lose thinking, feel empathy for the person you harmed, apologize authentically, take responsibility by acknowledging the hurt that your actions caused, show remorse and repair the harm.

THE APOLOGY CONTINUUM

Notice, know or realize you have caused harm to someone else

Sit with how noticing or knowing you caused harm makes you feel

Put aside pride, self-indulgence, excuses, or win-lose thinking

Feel empathy for the person you harmed

Apologize authentically

Take responsibility by acknowledging the hurt that your actions caused

Show remorse and repair the harm

I ENVISION A FUTURE WHERE, IF PRISONS STILL ACTUALLY EXIST ONE HUNDRED YEARS FROM NOW, THAT INSTEAD OF GUARDS, THEY WILL BE FILLED WITH HEALERS.

Where can apologies be practiced? Which institutions, which places of worship, which new history books, which private living rooms or hospital bedsides can be the containers and sanctuaries for authentic, embodied practice--for apologies?

For a harm-doer to give an authentic apology and make repair, and for the harmed to accept that apology, is to hear the shout of freedom and to answer it. I constantly dedicate my work in the Black feminist movement to my father, to my mother, to my experiences alone and in collective community. I ground my work in forgiveness and intentionally in the practice of forgiveness as an act of resistance.

We can either throw everyone who causes harm into the cages we currently call prisons or we can move forward into a future where there is a practice in investigating when, and where it is we lost sight ourselves and each others humanity.

We can enter a period of transformation that calls into question current ways of being and existing; a transformation which challenges and unhinges the very foot of patriarchy and racism not only off our necks but also off the necks of those who practice harm . That kind of reckoning is to truly recognize the humanity in all of us. There has to be a process of accountability that does not reduce into the oppressors from whom we are trying to get free.

For all women and femmes, to accept any apology is to engage in extraordinary acts of freeing oneself, extraordinary leaps towards healing, extraordinary steps in revolution and forms of liberation where even those who've caused harm must liberate themselves.

THIS IS NOT A STATEMENT ABOUT FORGIVING ALL THE RAPISTS. THIS IS NOT A SUGGESTION TO FORGIVE ALL THE BATTERERS. IT IS NOT A STORY ABOUT FORGIVING ALL THE SEX-TRAFFICKERS. THIS IS A NOT A CALL TO ALL TO PRACTICE FORGIVENESS AND ALL WILL BE WELL. NO.

For Black women, we know too well and are often trained and pushed by our spiritual communities into forgiving and just surviving. Even as girls we are conditioned to protect those who do us harm. We know that forgiveness is an individual and complex process, even when it is communal. It is a multi-layered process requiring profound meditative and a conscious series of decisions, as well as inner and outer confrontations.

However, as we think of moving more boldly and bravely into a future; I dare wonder whether we should enter into more authentic dialogue with each other and with harm-doers as human beings, who need to be asked about solutions and who also need to be given the opportunity to speak of what could or should have been different in their lives. **Can our fathers, grandfathers, our brothers and our sons tell us? Can they tell us what would have stopped them from raping, the first time? What would have stopped them from raping again and again?**

IS HAS BEEN LEFT UP TO THE RAPE SURVIVORS, THE SURVIVORS OF INCEST, THE SURVIVORS OF CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE TO CONDUCT THEIR OWN INQUEST, SEEK JUSTICE ON THEIR OWN, AND CONJURE THEIR OWN HEALING?

Has there been a public or private inquiry which gets at the root of why a person rapes? Is there an inquiry which asks the questions: why did you rape? Are those answers fully accessible to the public? Is there an inquiry which gets at the root and the truth of the moment in a person's life where an action or series of actions could have stopped and prevented them from raping? And what happened that community, that society, that culture, that family, never provided that prevention?

The answers I imagine we can get in order to bolster solutions to prevent rape in the future would be astounding, and go beyond what we already know from offender-management programs. I imagine we would also find it necessary to hear from those who don't make it to offender management programs, but end-up in prison or remain in our communities, on our campuses, our houses of worship and in our homes.

THE APOLOGY ACCEPTANCE CONTINUUM

affirm for yourself that someone has harmed you.

sit with how it feels to have lived through a painful event or endured multiple harms against you.

process your anger or any feelings which arise. If needed, process this with someone you trust and people who will honor your feelings.

know that when a person has harmed you, it is not your fault or responsibility.

reject the notion that someone else's behavior is in any way your burden.

resist any tendency to excuse or internalize the guilt that the harm-doer should be feeling.

it is ok for you to be angry, and holding on to anger can feel like a reclamation of power; however, relinquish any destructive rage.

forgive yourself first and set yourself as priority.

choose powerfully to accept or not to accept the apology.

choose whether to make a request for repair.

Why "The Apology" Is So Important

IN 2016 WE AT BLACK WOMEN'S BLUEPRINT ENTERED A NEW PHASE IN A PROCESS OF RECKONING THROUGH THE FIRST TRUTH AND INTRA-COMMUNITY RECONCILIATION COMMISSION IN THE U.S.

Just as many survivors talk about feeling human again, connecting to their bodies and their world again, is it possible that harm-doers can connect to their humanity again? And fully understand, connect with and internally acknowledge the harm they cause, and acknowledge the humanity of those they harm, as well as the communities and future generations impacted by the ripple effects of their actions.

We recognize that there were peoples in freed communities of old who "left no-one behind", not even the enslaved who were Black drivers or Black overseers, and these ancestors represent the great shoulders on which we stand today as we think of structural and historical contexts which continue to fuel patriarchy and violence, including rape and sexual assault and the trafficking of our girls by grown men. But our ancestors have left us with a blueprint for confronting the only people who were sometimes even scarier than the plantations owners themselves—the drivers and overseers who looked just like us. They were dangerous and they had something to prove, that they were not weak like the rest of the enslaved and they were invested in keeping their status as persons with the little power they already had, in a world where they were truly powerless.

It began with women and girls of African descent currently living in the United States, many of whom have been systematically denied access to intra-community or mainstream assistance and justice over entire lifetimes, who began to organize with the knowledge that their own and collective transformation could not happen without public recognition and acknowledgment of the injustices and harms they had experienced, as well as those dynamics which continued to perpetuate and solidify the identities of persons in our communities as overseers and drivers who ensure intergenerational trauma, contribute to the cyclical relationship between poverty and violence; and perpetuate our enslavement to trauma by their present-day actions.

Further, these early motivators behind the Truth and Reconciliation Commission became acutely aware of the shared legacies among survivors and harm-doers, of generational trauma induced by patriarchy, racism, a slave economy steeped in sexual violence. They realized we can't just build power for the sole purpose of countering power.

What then is the work we need to do as we become more survivor centered and trauma informed and begin to make Afro-futuristic visions manifest for taking back our lives and owning our rage and moving through it and healing from it?

WE NEED TO COME FACE TO FACE WITH WHAT WE FEAR MOST. WE NEED TO GET AT THE ANSWERS FROM HARM-DOERS THEMSELVES, NOT THE FIRST ANSWERS WHICH WILL UNDOUBTEDLY MAKE US CRINGE--LIKE SHE DESERVED IT, SHE WANTED IT, I DON'T KNOW, OR WORSE.

ONE WAY IS TO COME FACE-TO-FACE WITH THE HARM-DOERS AND GET THE SOLUTIONS WE KNOW WE CAN GET BY DOING WHAT EVE DID: ENTER A PERIOD TARGETED AND INTENTIONAL INQUIRY, OF DISCOVERY NOT IN A PROCESS WHICH TURNS THE HARM-DOER INTO A GUINEA-PIG, BUT IN A PROCESS OF ACCOUNTABILITY AND HUMANIZING THE HARM-DOER, WHILE GETTING AT THE TRUTH OF IT, NOT THE EXCUSE OF IT, THE TRUTH OF WHEN IS IT THE HARM-DOER DECIDED THEY HAD THE RIGHT TO VIOLATE A PERSON'S BODY, AND HOW DID THEY ARRIVE AT THAT DECISION?

AT BLACK WOMEN'S BLUEPRINT, WE HAVE ASKED RAPISTS WHO DON'T EVEN REALIZE THEY ARE RAPISTS THOSE SAME QUESTIONS AND WHAT IS MOST HORRIFYING IS THE REALIZATION OF HOW THE PAST IS EVER PRESENT BEYOND THE INDIVIDUAL, RELATIONAL, COMMUNAL, SOCIETAL LEVELS.

THE PAST IS EVER PRESENT IN THE STRUCTURAL AND THE HISTORICAL INTER-GENERATIONAL DYNAMICS IN OUR COMMUNITY, BUT WHAT IS ALSO EVER PRESENT IS THE BLUEPRINT WHICH CAN INFORM AND TRANSFORM FUTURE STRATEGY IN A PRACTICE OF WHAT I'VE COME TO CALL THE LIBERATORY PROCESS OF PREVENTION, ONE WHERE WE USE AND HONOR THE PAST NOT ONLY TO LIBERATE OURSELVES, BUT TO DEMAND FAMILIES AND COMMUNITIES LIBERATE THEMSELVES FROM THE CHAINS OF COMPLICITY. WE CAN CREATE NEW PARTICIPATORY PROCESSES FOR ENGAGING HARM-DOERS IN THE WORK TO END THE VIOLENCE THEY COMMIT. IF WE END VIOLENCE IN THIS DAY, WE CAN END VIOLENCE FOR FUTURE GENERATIONS.

