

A Young Person Despairing of the Evils of Racism Comes to Katie Cannon for Spiritual Direction

Katie Cannon (KC): Please come and sit down. Not many people your age come seeking spiritual direction from an academic theologian like me. I am glad to see you.

Young Seeker (YS): I am not sure why I am here. Maybe it is because you grew up in Kannapolis, North Carolina, not far from where I was raised, if that is the right term for what mostly didn't happen. Or maybe it is because I am once again despairing for people of color in our country — this time because of the murder of George Floyd, but even more so the murder of Breonna Taylor, because she was a medical worker trying to help keep people alive in this time of pandemic. It is that cadence in my mind of —Oh! No, once again. I am ready to abandon all hope that there is a God who cares or that there is any force for good in this world.

KC: Welcome, I have spent most of my life in the academic culture of white privilege, which did its best during my time at Union Theological Seminary in New York to inculcate me with the idea that a cold, abstract approach to faith was the only permissible path of understanding. I managed to survive that indoctrination and have become more and more convinced during the rest of my life that only an embodied knowledge of faith is a perspective that rings true, particularly for women, and especially for women of color. My intuitive feeling is that this will be a good conversation for us both.

YS: Thank you, for your kind welcome.

KC: As that wonderful Native American poet, William Stafford, once wrote, “the darkness around us is deep,” and that makes the clarity of conversation even more important. Start by telling me about yourself.

YS: I grew up in Mecklenburg County, North Carolina the county adjacent to where you grew up. My mother tried to do the best she could but she was a single mom, who only ever had low wage jobs that barely allowed her kids to have a roof and occasionally a full meal. I would go to school but often hardly saw her because she was working late shifts, which no one else wanted, at a nursing home. I never knew who my father was.

The schools in Mecklenburg County were desegregated in 1970's after the Swann case broke the barrier by which historical, legally required housing segregation always resulted in segregated schools. Swann allowed kids to ride the bus to integrate schools. But by the time I went to school the schools were already being re-segregated and selectively re-underfunded because of the charter school movement. I did finish high school and went on to Piedmont Community College to get trained as a nursing assistance. Seems like I am following in the limited, dismal path of my mom. I am not hopeful about my life or about things ever getting better for people like me.

KC: My great grandmother was born in slavery in 1832. Her last child my grandfather was the only one born free because he was born a few months after Lee surrendered in the spring of 1865. She had to walk from plantation to plantation after the Civil War looking for her children that had been sold away from her. My grandmother was born in 1882 just as the white privilege of those who had lost the Civil War was being restored by violence and lynchings. My mother had me in 1950 and when I was five I could not legally go to the public library in town. So I think you are asking a question that black people in this country have been asking for generations — where is God in the face of the evils of racism and its horrors, which so many have suffered firsthand.

YS: I don't have much hope and yet I don't want to fall into the pit of resentment and bitterness. I know I suffer the material disadvantages of racism. I don't want to suffer the emotional and spiritual ones also.

KC: The trauma of black women is carried in our DNA and passed down to our children. This began with the trauma of the horrors endured on slave ships and continued for centuries in human bondage where women and men were beaten, raped and lynched. This terror came from the god of economic privilege, not the God of the Bible. Not the God of Jesus who brought a message of love to the world.

YS: I know that horrible history, but what I don't understand is why after providing free labor to develop this country before the Civil War and after the Civil War free labor through the suffering of peonage in the South and the cheapest labor for the worst jobs across the country for over a century and a half — why are people evil to us? Why didn't Breonna get a civic award for her helping the sick instead of being murdered. Why after all of our blood, sweat and tears are we not embraced in gratitude? Instead we are given second class housing, education and healthcare. This is why I despair.

KC: My beloved child, let me see what lifelines I can offer you into the possibility of internal freedom — the kind that Nelson Mandela achieved, despite the fact he was in a jail cell for decades because of his skin color. Our spiritual and social fore-bearers teach us that its hard to fight for external fairness and justice unless there is internal freedom.

YS: What is strange is that almost all the hourly paid staff at the extended care facility where I work are black or hispanic and most of the patients there are old, white people. Sure I can banter with and care for these elderly white people as individuals, but at the same time this setting reflects with startling immediacy the have and have-not disparity caused by white privilege. My mother died very young simply from the stress of trying to feed her kids by working two jobs and not having the time or means to care for herself. I don't want the same fate. I need a major lifeline.

KC: Thank you for your honesty. This is always the place where we must start. And with that candor we must begin by understanding who we are. Without a sense of our own identity it is impossible for us to begin to have a sense of agency in our own lives. I am fortunate. I have a lineage of strong matriarchal foremothers. I have known all my life

that I am never alone that there have always been with me the spirits of these strong women who managed to have good inner lives through the most horrendous outer circumstances. In theological terms these are the communion of saints. These women that you need to rely on to give you a sense of your own identity need not be your own family members. They are the people we are drawn to that become our spiritual family of mentors. Who are some of the women that are your heroes?

YS: I love reading Toni Morrison, and in school I did a paper on the poetry of Gwendolyn Brooks.

KC: That is a good start. What you are attracted to in these two women are parts of you. You can claim your identity from them. You can see that your spirit embodies the spirit that you admire in them.

You might also want to read Alice Walker in her collection of essays, *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose*. She led black women theologians like me to examine the threefold oppressions black women suffer of racism, sexism and classism — and for black women how these three forces have created a particular Christian meaning template for black women.

YS: Okay, so I see how I have some work to do about claiming my own identity, but even if I do, how do I find anything hopeful in this country we live in where so many of those in control seek to enforce ever more racist's policies.

KC: Let me give you a few thoughts on hope. What can be helpful is to frame a discussion about hope around the difference between ego hope, which is either a positive or negative expectation of the future that pulls one out of the present, and soul (essence) hope, which is a state of being that comes from knowing that there is an intelligence, a love, a beauty, something bigger than our small self to meet us when we are open and present to our own indwelling Spirit in the midst of what is before us.

YS: I want to believe with all my heart as Martin Luther King said, that the arc of history is in the right direction, toward justice, but I have to have something greater than a hope attached to the future to sustain me in a world rife with racist's policies. I can see the distinction you are making about hope and it sounds important, but I want to have some ego hope that things can get better, that I can get a middle class job and have children who have a chance to grow up without being killed or put in prison because they are black.

KC: Paradoxically the most hopeful way — and I use that word without irony — for those ego hopes to materialize is for us to develop the inner hope that comes from our ability to be present and open and in touch with the experience of our own beingness grounded in a greater reality of beingness (the theological expression for this understanding of God is the Ground of Being) that includes the spirits and souls of those in our spiritual family that came before us.

YS: I was afraid you were going to say that.

KC: I wish it were different, but for a people who for the first couple hundred years on this continent were in profound bondage and for the last two hundred have been caught in the vice of systemic racism the only possible freedom has come from being able to escape interiorly and more particularly to escape within in the context of the community of the black church. For hundreds of years our worship services have been both to praise God and to claim if just for a couple of hours an inner experience of freedom that no external circumstances can take from us.

YS: No offense, but that might be good enough for your generation, but I am not sure it is for me.

KC: None taken. Here is the thing, it doesn't work to get to this place intellectually. That will not make you feel free. The only way to meaningfully get to this place is with an embodied sense of your divine goodness before God and to feel you are able to be constantly in the stream of Her love so that you hold inwardly to a Light much brighter than the slings and arrows of racism around you. This inner peace will then allow you to engage in the action that is your gift to bring to the world, whether it be through healing ministry, music, or marching. Always when we engage our divine gift we bring more love, more social love — which is justice, to the world.

YS: So you are saying don't chuck this idea out of finding inner freedom within community without trying to live in it.

KC: Correct, I am saying you are of a lineage that has the most rich inner heritage of embodied faith that has ever existed on this continent, at least since the coming of Africans and Europeans to this land. That heritage is mediated by some of the strongest deeply spiritually grounded black women who have ever lived and this communion of saints, is a part of your identity, is there pulling for you at every turn in your life. This heritage wants you to have the self-care and all the mental health and emotional support you need. Claim your heritage, my beloved, and the love you will receive from it will allow you to fall into the power and agency God has given to empower strong, loving black women in America. Then my dear you will be one of those chosen to help take down the self defeating, heart breaking barriers that centuries of racism have created around us. As the author Michael Eric Dyson recently said, you will be a part of how "black women repeatedly save America. Period."

YS: [smiles] I don't know exactly why, but for the first time in a long while I am feeling hopeful. Thank you so much for taking time to talk with me.

KC: Bless you, my child. Go in Peace with the knowledge of how deeply you are loved and how strong is the heritage that supports you.