

2021 Anthology

SOCIAL JUSTICE

Writing

Foreword by humanitarian writer Chris Herlinger
Edited by Luvon Roberson, Maitri Butcher
& Dr. Vernay Mitchell-McKnight



Riverside Writing Group

An Education Ministry Small Group of The Riverside Church

Messages from Clergy of The Riverside Church

“Oppressive language does more than represent violence; it is violence; does more than represent the limits of knowledge; it limits knowledge.”

-Toni Morrison, Nobel Lecture December 7, 1993

Social Justice writing is the language of freedom. It is a cry for justice in a land weary of oppression, a shout for justice where silence has been imposed, a word of truth to dispel the lies that mock knowledge and create false realities that divide people and obscure the way forward.

Whether fiction or non-fiction, writing about social justice can liberate minds and touch hearts. It can ignite, inspire, and provoke. It can clear paths and erase boundaries that enclose minds. It can tell the truth of our history and seed the creativity from which new solutions emerge and a new future becomes possible. Social Justice writing is an instrument of liberation. Our need for such writing will not be exhausted until a true democracy exists in this nation.

The Declaration of Independence is brilliant and eloquent Social Justice writing. Yet the institutions founded upon that eloquence have not yet produced an inclusive democracy that honors our broad diversity.

The Riverside Writing Group: 2021 Anthology/Social Justice Writing is a gift to all those fortunate enough to read and to be inspired by the imagination and craft of the contributors. May their work now and work to come help to turn promise into reality.

I am grateful to the team of creators who have made this anthology possible and trust this is the beginning of an annual infusion of literature to awaken and nurture an insatiable hunger for justice in our land. Write on! Right on!

*Grace and peace,
Rev. Michael Livingston
Interim Senior Minister*



Messages from Clergy of The Riverside Church

Writing is a way of telling the story of our people, of our moment, of our faith and calling for change. Writing is central to my faith. My writing journey began when I was in high school youth group. I didn't know how much I loved writing until I started writing daily. Sharing my writings with others and growing in God's grace has helped me strengthen my faith.

I encourage you now to start writing and don't give up. People need your words and your work. They need to hear your messages of justice and embodied faith.

Social Justice writing from giants like Howard Thurman, Martin Luther King Jr., Dietrich Bonhoeffer, and many others has led to the most significant social justice victories in history. And, I believe writing is an instrument of change today as well.

Author David Brooks says, "New life is always possible, for the person and the nation." Writing is a way to bring about new life. The Bible also tells us that Jesus cared deeply about the social causes around him. I pray those who read this anthology will be inspired to take what they learn and put their faith in action, working for change.

May these writings provide for us all a foundation for theological exploration, learning, and connecting embodied faith to the world. Thank you, dear Writers, for sharing your work with us in this publication - and Readers, may you be inspired to write as well.

*Rev. Bruce Lamb
Minister of Faith Formation*

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Throughout history, the power of the pen has memorialized events, cultivated minds, and inspired movements. Even the deadliest battles have historically come to an end with the crafting of the right combination of words spoken to the right person. There is no weapon that holds more power than words.

The writers of yesterday provided an opportunity for all of us to learn well beyond the limits of our time and social settings. It is with this spirit we must continue the triumphant challenge of educating, enlightening, and inspiring every generation as they come. It is imperative that our future society reap the benefits of the lessons we have learned. And, more importantly, the ones we failed to learn.

Through our writing, may every reader experience the sweat and tears of our triumphs and failures. Let us share our love, our pain, the burden of our struggles, and yes, even the perilous torment of our hatred. Through the power of our words, we can embolden the desire for positive change and invigorate our world with new possibilities.

So let your spirit be your guide. Write with every fiber of your being! Let your passion flow through your pen into a composition of compelling words selected intentionally for the purpose of changing the world.

God has provided the power. I have the power. You have the power. Words have the power. Use them well!

*Minister Charlene A. Wingate
Adult Christian Education*



Message from Riverside Mission & Social Justice Member

As a member of the Riverside Mission and Social Justice Commission, I am pleased that the new Riverside Writing Group chose “Social Justice Writing” as its first theme.

Today, the very survival of our planet is at stake. Racism and xenophobia are rampant, the wealth gap is widening, and government by and for “we the people” is under attack. Now more than ever, the people’s voice for social, economic, racial, and environmental justice is needed.

Inaugurating the writing group’s first theme, keynote speaker Chris Herlinger challenged us to follow in the footsteps of George Orwell, who said, “I write ... because there is some lie that I want to expose, some fact to which I want to draw attention” Then the group’s leaders offered writing prompts to stretch our voices for justice, challenging us to try different forms (e.g., short story, Op-Ed, poetry) for publication in a variety of media (e.g., blog, newspaper, social media).

May we all continue to expose lies and witness the truth.

Carol Fouke-Mpoyo

Member, Riverside Mission and Social Justice Commission

Member, Riverside Writing Group

About The Riverside Writing Group

About Riverside Writing Group

For nearly two years, the entire world has been held hostage by the COVID pandemic, which has thrown a black light on all manner of injustice, illuminating with glowing light for all of us to see centuries-old realities of inequity, brutality, disparities in health and wealth at the same time calling us as never before to see how – literally – we cannot live in this world without affecting (or infecting) each other. Planet Earth is the one home we all share. Humanness is our irrefutable bond.

So as to offer one pathway for Riverside Church and Friends to help build community in the pandemic and in a world of heightened awareness of generations of injustice and oppression, the **Riverside Writing Group** was created by Luvon Roberson, Debra Brace, Dr. Vernay Mitchell-McKnight, and Maitri Butcher, with pastoral guidance from Minister Charlene Wingate, Adult Education Committee. Rev. Bruce Lamb leads The Riverside Church Education Ministry.

Riverside Writing Group affirms our common human connection and invites all to join us in writing – in many different styles and genres – as a powerful tool for social justice: To write words that witness and speak truth to our shared humanness.

Each Riverside Writing Group series showcases a guest presenter -- well-known published writer -- who focuses on a writing genre in 40-minute presentation, followed by 20-minute Q&A from participants. Riverside Writing Group then invites participants to join in four weekly prompt-based writing sessions focused on the particular writing genre, after which they may choose to read their work at our OPEN MIC Night. When feasible, we publish an anthology of work submitted by writers who participated in any component of the writing series and we launch the anthology with a book party.

Our Mission

The mission of Riverside Writing Group is aligned with particular aspects of the following:

The Riverside Church | Article II Mission (excerpt):

Members are called to an individual and collective quality of life that leads to personal, spiritual, and social transformation, witnessing to God's saving purposes for all creation. Therefore, the Church pledges itself to education, reflection, and action for peace and justice and the realization of the vision of the heavenly banquet where all are loved and blessed.

Adult Education Committee of The Riverside Church | Mission Statement

The Mission of the Riverside Church Adult Education Committee is to collaborate in the learning and planning of programs in an inclusive, interactive environment of sharing, that fosters spiritual growth, strengthens faith identity, and promotes social justice.

The key objective of Riverside Writing Group is to provide a welcoming, supportive forum for participants through specific genre-writing focus so as to express ideas, as well as voice, create, and share writings that bring to life and strengthen The Riverside Church mission and the Adult Christian Education mission.

- Riverside Writing Group Co-Creators & Planning Team



About Our 2021 Anthology: Social Justice Writing

Our anthology is a curated collection that showcases the work of writers who participated in any of the four weekly prompt-based writings sessions and/or registered for Riverside Writing Group's debut virtual presentation on "Social Justice Writing: An Introduction" delivered on 8.26.21 by acclaimed humanitarian writer Chris Herlinger.

We invited those writers to submit their fiction, non-fiction, letter, Op-Ed, essay, poetry, screenplay, memoir, novel, historical fiction, historical non-fiction, journalism, songwriting, stage writing/playwriting, sermon, public service announcement, podcast, blog, tweet series, flash fiction, or other writing genre. We looked for contemplative, globally aware, truth-telling, and apathy-busting works, based on the writing prompts provided in the four weekly prompt-based writing sessions (via Zoom on 9.2.21, 9.9.21, 9.16.21, 9.23.21).

We also invited the writers to join our private group page on Facebook, where they can find daily inspiration to write justice in the supportive community of fellow writers.

Each writer is the sole copyright owner of their entry/entries. The copyright in the Anthology as a curated collective work belongs to the publisher of the anthology, namely TRC/Education Ministry/Riverside Writing Group.

You are holding their justice work in your hands.

-Riverside Writing Group Co-Creators & Planning Team

Foreword by Chris Herlinger

I was honored to be the kickoff speaker for the social justice focus of the Riverside Writing Group. And I am deeply honored – and humbled – to write the foreword of this fine anthology of poetry and prose.

The committed writers whose work you will read have embraced one of the guiding spirits of our time together, the novelist and essayist George Orwell, who, in his 1946 essay, “Why I Write,” declared that his starting point as a writer was “always a feeling of partisanship, a sense of injustice.” When he sat down to write, Orwell said, there was always a lie he wanted to expose.

For a white, heterosexual, Socialist British male of the 1940s, those lies stemmed from the threat of fascism and other totalitarian systems, as well as an entrenched class hierarchy and a colonial empire that was beginning to crumble.

In our own times, writers of a variety of identities and life experiences championing social justice are faced with no lack of themes to tackle: widespread economic inequities, both in the United States and globally; endemic racism and sexism; misogyny and homophobia; the frustrating and never-ending quest to provide housing, education, and medical care for all; and, of course, protecting the earth from the climate crisis – a crisis driven by a system of dependence on fossil fuels which has done great harm to our planet and also to our souls.

In our cherished time together, the Riverside writers and I talked not only about Orwell but other models and examples to help us on our writing paths: the socially-aware fiction of novelists Upton Sinclair and John Steinbeck; the passionate (and still wholly relevant) work of essayist James Baldwin; the prescient writing of environmentalist Rachel Carson; and, in our own time, the provocative and truth-filled work of opinion writers like Charles Blow and Roxane Gay.

There are many more, and given this project’s roots in the church, we should not overlook the relevance of holy texts to social justice writing. The Book of Isaiah tells us to “Learn to do good; seek justice, correct oppression; bring justice to the fatherless; and plead the widow’s cause.”

Seeking to do good, promote justice, and end oppression are at the heart of social justice writing. But there is another heart – a strong, beating heart – which is to call out the forces that deny humanity to our brothers and sisters. All of us, but particularly those of us who have known gender, economic, and racial privilege need to hear this “call out” and embrace a greater sense of empathy and solidarity.

One of the anthology contributors, poet Gary Samuel Bogle of Brooklyn, summarizes this simply and eloquently when he writes: “I am you, and you are me.”

Let’s go forward with Bogle and other writers in this fine anthology to not only seek justice, but to do justice.

Chris Herlinger

NY and International Correspondent

Global Sisters Report, a project of National Catholic Reporter



Introduction

“Here was peace. She pulled in her horizon like a great fish-net. Pulled it from around the waist of the world and draped it over her shoulder. So much of life in its meshes! She called in her soul to come and see.”

-Zora Neale Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937)

This quote could well be about justice. As it is only in justice that all creations on Earth can know peace, can name peace. And, we love how Zora Neale Hurston, who wrote ethnographic fiction, appreciates how so much of life, so many threads or pieces are needed for peace – or justice. These words speak to us because that is also the birth process of this anthology, the first edition in our writing series across genres and themes, which focuses on Social Justice Writing.

Mission & Social Justice (MSJ) member Carol Fouke-Mpoyo (also a Riverside Writing Group member) led us to acclaimed humanitarian writer Chris Herlinger, who delivered our debut presentation “Social Justice Writing: An Introduction,” via Zoom on August 26, 2021.

And, the ongoing communication between Carol and MSJ lay leader Sumati Devadutt was integral to Riverside Writing Group: They also introduced the Land & People Acknowledgement which we went on to incorporate in all our Zoom gatherings. Our writers even began to post where they were Zooming in from, by naming regional People’s unceded lands across our nation!

Our fish-net’s other meshes:

“Messages From Clergy,” offerings by Interim Senior Minister Rev. Michael Livingston, Faith Formation/Education Minister Rev. Bruce Lamb, and Adult Christian Education Minister Charlene Wingate.

“Foreword,” by Chris Herlinger, who launched our series and provided us with our lens or black light in writing justice as “exposing the lie.”

TRC Communications Team, Rev. Jim Keat, Brian Simpson, and Jones Acquah, for their superb creative design and production of our anthology. Because of their efforts, we can hold this booklet in our hands.

Much appreciation to Debra Bracey for guiding us in the initial stages of organizing the writing series, drawing from her longtime experience as a facilitator in Riverside Writers’ Support Group over a decade ago, which Riversider Dorothy Marcus founded at The Riverside Church.

Lastly, and most fervently, deep gratitude to the 50 writers and writers-to-be who registered for our August 26, 2021 debut presentation by Chris as well as all the writers who participated in our four weekly prompt-based writing sessions and in our OPEN MIC Night. Your justice writing, your love of justice is how we humans pull in our horizon like a giant fish-net, gathering all strands of life’s divine creation into it for our soul to witness.

May this anthology be witness to peace and justice!

Luvon Roberson, Maitri Butcher, Dr. Vernay Mitchell-McKnight/Riverside Writing Group Co-Creators & Planning Team



My Personal Experience of Anthology-Making

The exciting work that resulted in this anthology is not something I thought much about before I started it. I wasn't that insightful back then, but all that has changed. What a pleasure it has been to co-create and plan this kind of experience where we encouraged and motivated people of different backgrounds and talents to participate in prompt-based writing sessions focused on social justice.

Some of us over the years helped to produce gains in social justice by protesting with militantly-designed placards, taking over buildings, organizing communities, and pressing for voting rights. This writing experience is still another way of encouraging people to raise awareness and demand social change. It is a way of continuing the protest with the written word. It forces us to contemplate and give deeper meaning to what we may or may not have accomplished previously.

The stories, poems, essays, and other forms in this anthology shine a bright light on where we have been and where we might go in bringing about a safer and more just world. The variety of genres represented here demonstrates that forming a writing community can bring a multi-faceted focus to important issues and motivate audiences far beyond our usual contacts.

We are proud of this important work!

- *Dr. Vernay Mitchell-McKnight*



September 2, 2021 Writing Prompts

1. Op-Ed piece ***They Escaped New York During the Pandemic. Make Them Pay.*** March 11, 2021, by Luke Winkie
2. Write a letter to the editor or Op-Ed piece (newspaper, magazine): How your COVID pandemic experience informs your (new/emerging) vision of what justice looks like.
3. How might your ancestors or grandparents or parents or children or grandchildren see a world living in social harmony? Write about their vision of that future world.

WRITING GENRES

Essay

Elizabeth Mosier, Regina M. Tate, Tita Anntares

Poetry

Gary Samuel Bogle

Speculative Fiction

Dr. Vernay Mitchell-McKnight

Narrative Non-Fiction

Constance Belton Green

From Then to Now

Walking across campus to the parking lot to unlock her hover scooter, Kenyani started for home after spending hours researching her senior paper in history. Her hoodie was emblazoned “Class of 2065,” in sequins. She and her family were super proud that Kenyani would soon be a university graduate and live in a world where many injustices of the past were eliminated. However, writing this paper was exceptionally challenging for her generation due to the Prohibition of Critical Race Theory, a federal law passed decades ago depriving cohorts of students a complete understanding of U.S. history.

That law purged everything related to race, slavery, and social injustice from school curriculum and most media platforms. This eradication of “uncomfortable” parts of history was accomplished easily, due to the disastrous results of the 2024 presidential election. The Presidency and both houses of Congress were won by people on the far conservative side who thought they were being “replaced” by people of color and who didn’t believe systemic racism or social and generational disadvantage existed. As a result, Kenyani and her classmates had to catch up on history missing from their primary and secondary education when the now-extinct prohibition law was active.

As she rode home from campus avoiding all the other hover vehicles on and above the streets, Kenyani knew her task was daunting. Fortunately, her learning was supplemented by discussions with parents and grandparents. These talks informed her not only of facts of history but also demeaning past experiences. Her forebears told of anxiety when applying for a job, accessing higher education, or seeking a mortgage. They couldn’t quite remember all events and dates of the injustices, but they told of feeling devalued, excluded, persecuted. They told her about slavery, Jim Crow, and the civil rights movement; then rejoiced about societal changes that moved people and politics to more justice prevailing in 2065.

Kenyani was incredulous: Why did a slogan need invention letting people know Black Lives Matter? Why no national recognition of Juneteenth or Indigenous People’s Day until 2021? Why decades-long court debates deciding separate schools for different races could be equal? She was amazed at the number of times “disproportionately” appeared in U.S. history —people of color disproportionately affected on all negative indicators in health, education, employment, and housing. A most outrageous constitutional idiocy she learned: Enslaved people counted as only three-fifths of a person.

With these thoughts in mind, she parked her scooter at home. The most important subject to focus on was how things changed. She, in 2065, had a more just life than her parents and grandparents. How did this social change happen? What movements and policies prompted fair voting rights? How did Black people win reparations for slavery that paid for her university education? She realized how her paper could be an important treatise. This would be her opus! At her desk Kenyani felt profound responsibility in telling this story as she placed the dictation helmet on her head and began to speak.

*Dr. Vernay Mitchell-McKnight
Bronxville, NY*



Delivery

When New York City shut down in March, 2020, I am totally alone.

What about food?!

I don't dare rush out to the local store. I know I might inhale the wrong molecule and suffocate to death within 3 weeks or faster. I try to call the store, hoping they might deliver food. Non-stop busy. Luckily, unlike the week after the 9/11 attacks, I have access to my cell phone and the Internet. And fortunate enough to have a job that did not shut down and the power to continue working on my home computer and in these new meetings called Zoom. So I still have a working credit card.

I find some online food delivery services and spend more than an hour sorting through my many options. I assemble my shopping list, fill out my credit card info and address. Then I take a safe breath and hit the order button. Within a day or two, the doorbell rings. A polite young man puts my heavy bag of food down on the ground at a safe distance so I can disinfect the cardboard.

He is the first of what would become hundreds of young black and brown men delivering what I need. And want -- the boxes of food soon became orders for masks. Shoes. A dress. A special lighting system for my Zoom meetings. Some furnishings to redecorate my living room. More and more deliveries. Sometimes arriving daily.

I am grateful to these black and brown young men who choose to venture into the plague ridden front lines to keep us safe... I tip extra. But almost a year later when only endangered groups can get access to the still rare vaccine, I ask if they qualify. No, not yet. And news pundits wonder why communities of color have more COVID cases...

I realize I am living in a modern-day wired plantation...

To meet their own needs and help their families survive, these young -- and sometimes aging -- men of color have no choice but to risk their lives delivering to my privileged self.

Tita Anntares

Upper West Side, NY



Can We Imagine What We Do Not See?

Recently, I listened to a retelling of the Tulsa Massacre of 1921. Between 1865 and the late 1920s, destruction of Black lives and Black property was normalized throughout the nation from Oklahoma, to Texas, to Chicago, to Washington DC, to New York City, and beyond.

In this big picture, Black lives and Black property are impacted almost daily. In my family, not unlike many Black families, there are stories handed down from grandmother to mother to child; intergenerational stories. One story told by my grandmother described why my family migrated from New Bern, North Carolina during the 1920s to Virginia and New York City. In New Bern, North Carolina my family, including aunts and uncles, lived in colonial clapboard center hallway homes on tree lined streets; homes that were far better than some of the white townspeople.

A fire occurred one evening, and as the flames jumped from one Black owned home to the next, pleas for water went unanswered. Our family homes burned to the ground as townspeople looked on. We knew the fire had been intentional; but proving it was unheard of. My family was not permitted to rebuild; property conscripted. With few remaining possessions, our family migrated to Virginia and New York City.

My mother's retelling of this story over time illuminated less about the property destruction, and more about our family's abiding faith, resilience, entrepreneurship, education goals, and actions. It became a story of never giving up, and that the American dream included people like us. Still, I never forgot the other story: a story of what happened, of what still could happen.

I ask what stories will I tell my grandchildren? Will I include stories of achievement alongside stories of destruction; stories of thriving alongside stories of displacement? Until we collectively address our nation's violent past, pathways to social justice are dim visions.

Race is a historical social construct created in America that empowers; elevates and downgrades. Identity by race was never meant to be a neutral category; rather, a caste system granting privilege or marginalization.

Can we imagine transforming the consequences of this intentional social construct? Can we imagine applying social justice and equitable treatment to dismantle privilege and power? These are difficult and uncomfortable conversations; and yet, they are necessary conversations. How does healing and transformative change occur without such conversations?

The Pandemic of 2020-21 dismantled illusions that we can delay addressing issues of social justice; issues that have been historically ignored. I submit that to imagine a future for justice begins by acknowledging the damage caused in our past. We must tell our stories; a telling in our voices. We must tell our family stories; lives lived, traumas endured, achievements made. We must tell stories of joys, hopes, and dreams.

We must tell our stories. And, we must listen to the stories that others tell us.

Constance Belton Green, JD, EdD
Hartford, CT



The Mnemonic Power of Artifacts

My mother descended into Alzheimer's disease while I was a volunteer technician at an archaeology lab. Though writing about being erased from my mother's memory was too difficult, processing artifacts helped me sort through this ambiguous loss: my mother, present but gone.

National Park Service archaeologists had exposed the foundation of the house where George Washington lived when Philadelphia was our nation's capital, revealing the bow window he added as a space to meet visitors on equal footing. This deliberate symbol of democracy—the architectural precedent for the Oval Office—lay just feet from where Hercules, one of nine enslaved Africans who worked in the house, cooked the president's meals. Searching beneath the surface of a city I knew by its monuments and celebrated citizens was an irresistible project of recovery and repair, but I wasn't looking for subject matter. I was there to quietly grieve, while washing broken dishes and labeling, mending, and cataloguing fragments of history.

In the process, I learned to see artifacts as evidence—of consumer patterns, social practices, politics, relationships—that constitutes and corrects the stories we tell. Like the animal bones found in Colonial-era privy pits, showing that Philadelphia's working class ate mostly fish, its merchant class ate mostly fowl, and everyone ate pigs. Or the eighteenth-century property maps and city directories testifying to Old City's racial, economic, and cultural diversity. These artifacts of everyday life speak for people absent from the dominant historical record.

James Oronoko Dexter, for example. An enslaved coachman who bought his freedom, he helped establish the Free African Society with Richard Allen and Absalom Jones, and hosted meetings for the founders of St. Thomas African Episcopal Church in his home near President Washington's. But for the mnemonic power of artifacts—a mention in prominent Quaker Elizabeth Drinker's diary, an entry in a coffin maker's 1799 daybook, an archived newspaper death notice—Dexter's story might be forgotten, one more in a multitude. Losing our cultural memory, intentionally or unintentionally, damages human welfare and degrades American identity. The consequence is collective grief, miring us in what we know but cannot face.

Archaeology makes grief tangible.

Time spent handling artifacts trained me to see buried truth as a “taphonomy of disaster,” a phrase coined by anthropologist Shannon Lee Dawdy. Archaeologists study taphonomic processes (like burial, decay, and preservation) that affect how remains accrue and fossilize differently within a site. Dawdy, liaison between FEMA and Louisiana Division of Archaeology after Hurricane Katrina, used the term to illuminate the “mix of accident and manipulation, the silences and erasures” that shape the archaeological record after a sudden chaotic event.**

Grieving, I sometimes found this slow, meticulous work frustrating, like meditating with an unruly mind. But over time, showing up for my shift made seeking meaning a practice: sitting with the shattered past, pondering what to salvage and how to rebuild.

Elizabeth Mosier
St. David's, PA

**Shannon Lee Dawdy. (2006). *The Taphonomy of Disaster and the (Re)Formation of New Orleans*. *American Anthropologist*, 108(4), 719–730. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4496514>



The only revolution is self-realization

The only revolution is self-realization.
Until I realize that
I am you,
and you me,
we will continue to war and disagree.

World peace is nonexistent
if we continue to believe that
democracy is the result of social conversation.

World peace
is only the result of heart breaking sadhana.
Singing,
dancing,
chanting,
prayer,
wisdom,
self-reflection,
meditation,
service, and
days of silence.

Until we learn how to simply sit
we will continue to walk
circles around social harmony.

What if Pop culture was filled with divine love?
Instead, we value sex, drugs, violence, and
entertainment.

Leading our youth to believe
turning up is more crucial than literacy and self-
reflection.

An education system prioritizing career and college
readiness
is an outdated waste of time and money,
considering it has not stopped the increase
in mental illness and the school-to-prison pipeline.

Education should prioritize spiritual wellbeing, literacy,
and arithmetic.

What if every student had a right
to evidence based spiritual practices
such as yoga and meditation?

The only revolution is self-realization.
Until I realize that
I am you,
and you me,
we will continue to war and disagree.

World peace only exists
when we believe that
democracy is the result of journeying inward.

Life is full of opposites,
and multiple perspectives.

A spiritual journey is all about shifting our attention
from the outward distractions to the soul within.
In our experience we have a physical, mental, and
energy body.

Our energy body is the vehicle to the divine.
Our breath can purify the 5 elements that we consist of,
and increase the prana in our body,
enabling our consciousness to rise into higher states of
existence.

Once we reach the pinnacle of existence,
we will experience on a subtle level,
I am you, and you are me.

*Gary Samuel Bogle
Brooklyn, NY*



Letter to the World from a Dark Sister

Part I: Regarding the Creation of a Modern Wizard of Oz

*Toto ran and with his teeth pulled back the curtain and exposed an old man behind it.
The man bellowed: Pay no attention to the man behind the curtain!
-The Wizard of Oz, 1939*

We are living in a time of tumultuous change. Some of the changes of our past that we have witnessed have become part of our collective consciousness.

One such memory that has become part of our collective consciousness is the attack on our country that took place on September 11, 2001. On that day, thousands of people died in fewer than 8 hours. We learned to fear evils that could be visited upon us from outside of this nation's borders.

However, the election of Donald Trump has also become part of our collective consciousness. I am reminded of the classic story of *The Wizard of Oz*. As you may recall, in the story, four friends go on the road, seeking the wizard's assistance in securing four strengths: heart, courage, brains, and a way to get home.

The wizard is the man behind the curtain that created for himself and his followers a world that never truly existed. We are now facing dangers from within our borders.

Here are seven of the most pressing dangers:

First, Mr. Trump, during his tenure in office, expressed disdain for our nation's Constitution, our rule of law, people of color, the poor, women, the disabled, immigrants, and the elderly. In short, he has shown contempt for the overwhelming majority of our population.

Second, the rise of a 24/7 news media cycle that spreads misinformation about the outcome of our last presidential election, our rights to vote as full citizens living in a democracy, and a continued disinformation campaign about the effectiveness of the COVID vaccines.

Third, we witnessed, on January 6th of this year, a violent attack on our nation's Capitol that was done for the purpose of attempting to void the valid results of our last presidential election.

Fourth, we have experienced racial unrest that resulted in large part from the unlawful killing of many law abiding, unarmed African American citizens by our nation's police. One such killing, the murder of George Floyd, was video-taped and broadcast around the world.

Fifth, we have seen the increasing wealth gap in our country, leading to an ever-expanding class of citizens who are now living below our poverty line.

Sixth, our planet is literally on fire. This summer, the National Weather Service has recorded the highest temperatures on record. Yet fossil fuel companies continue to mine fossil fuels to the detriment of our planet while steadfastly avoiding their obligation to pay their fair share of taxes.

Last, but not least, the pandemic has literally squeezed the life out of more than 4 million people around the world.

*Regina. M. Tate
Brooklyn, NY*



Letter to the World from a Dark Sister

Part II: Regarding the Creation of a Modern *Wizard of Oz*

The modern day wizard, Mr. Trump, who once stood behind the curtain, was successful in portraying a fantasy world as a result of, not magic, but chicanery, which was and is dependent upon the gullibility, ignorance, and arrogance of a receptive audience. It is an audience that needed to believe that he could turn the clock back, that the election of Joe Biden and Kamala Harris was a fraud, and that business could continue as usual.

Moreover, this receptive audience wants to believe that the majority of the millions of voters who elected Biden and Harris could simply be made to disappear. Trump was and is the ultimate salesman to promote and share his distorted vision of our society.

At the end of the friends' journey in *The Wizard of Oz* they learn some important truths. Firstly, the wizard was a fraud whose claim to fame was to create a fantasy world that never truly existed, that democratic principles were not part of our blood-stained history, that our nation's heritage or history does not contain a legacy of struggle for equal protection, and that voting rights were only the tools of a chosen few.

The second lesson the four travelers learned: The skills they sought from the wizard were skills they already possessed. They had all the skills they needed to function effectively in the real world. They used their hearts, brains, and courage to stand fully in the truth of who they really were. In the end, they all found their way home.

As people of faith we are called to use our hearts, brains, and courage to successfully address the daunting problems of our time. The civil rights movement began with a small group of people who used their hearts, brains, and courage to commence the journey that led them to take their seats at the table of democracy. Historically, our nation has never made progress in effectuating social change any other way.

The scriptures tell us that our faith is our rock, our armor, and our power. The road that we must travel is a journey and not a destination. Collectively, we have -- with our courage -- more brains, money, resources, voters, and strength than the people who seek to hold us hostage to their fantasy of the past.

Let's get to work.

Regina M. Tate
Brooklyn, NY



September 9, 2021 Writing Prompts

1. What would you tell an unborn baby who will enter this world into a family that is penniless and homeless?
2. What would you tell an unborn baby born into a family of much wealth, power, and influence?

WRITING GENRES

Psalm/Praise Song

Leslie Sussan

Poetry

Gary Samuel Bogle, J. A. Forgione, Joshua James Powell

Lyrical Prose

Maitri Butcher

Void

No matter the past, present, or future
you're entering into a world with those that have nothing,
those that have enough,
and those that have a whole lot.

Every life is precious.
The mind is the core of the human kingdom.
Don't let your mind drag through this world
worrying about the idea of status,
because who you were yesterday is not the same person as today.

My unborn child, lead with love and kindness.
However, be strong so that your voice is not weak.
We must not prey on others, my child,
but pray for others.
So you too may be granted the universal acceptance,
to fill the void that makes people feel incomplete.

Joshua James Powell
East Orange, NJ

A Psalm for the Newly Born

You come fresh from the divine lap and trail clouds of love. You come into a world that has forgotten divine justice. Wail! Cry out! Be not silent! Use every bit of oxygen from the second it first slices into your gentle lungs! Your voice is new and strong. Your innocence can speak from the divine heart to the human conscience. Call out for justice, for kindness, for beauty, for peace. Remind our hearts of their true home. Stop up your ears to those who will tell you that the world is what it is and always was, that you deserve no more, and that hope is foolish. Shut up the false litanies of limits and separation, of despair and desperation. Do not heed those who tell you what you are not worth and what you cannot accomplish. Open your human heart only to love that speaks to that of God within you. Focus your eyes only on the true and the beautiful. Look around you and find the good that lies beneath the coldness and the pain. Find the blessings hidden in the darkness and carry them forth to shine before a world blinded to beauty by its own greed and anger and fear. Grow into the songs of rejoicing that can bring healing and reconciliation to human hearts. You are being birthed to bring a new thing to a world badly in need of it. Be true to your unique gift and you will surely fulfill a calling of love to this world of injustice and suffering. It will be your gift to see past the surface and dispel the illusions. It will be your vision to open truths that bring healing through the pain and display beauty beyond the ugliness. It will be your power to dig past the accrued history of lost hopes and betrayed promises to recover the love in every heart. In your weakness, you will bring true strength. So shout the hallelujahs that the willfully deaf will hear them! Raise the banners so even the closed eyes will have to see! And the people will say the amens!

*Leslie Sussan
Silver Spring, MD*



To a Child Yet Unborn

You still feel mostly the beating
of your mother's heart.
It beats like the heart of any human woman anywhere.

So first off, I want you to know
being born into this ain't your fault.
It's like it is for any kid.
Your job will be just to grow up.
Which is gonna be really hard,
because you're gonna see
how oddly the people you belong to act –
the ones you hoped to connect with,
the ones you knew were waiting for you.

They're going to fail you.

Yeah. I'm sorry about that.

And they will be
nice in that fake way
that will gaslight you, shut you up.
You might give in. It's hard
not to conform when the weapons
are silencing, isolation, cruelty.
A persuasion that will not be kind.

I'm sorry about that too.

Hold on till you are old enough
to choose who you can be with. Like,
five, say.

My best advice: then find places and people
where you can stay a little rough around the edges. And
don't settle for loneliness.

Also. Your people are going to act like they know every-
thing.
But that's a fraud.

I would explain this if I could. And yes,
that's the third thing I'm sorry about.

To understand,
you'll have to grow up.

Some year, on some day –
maybe you'll be a teenager. It could take longer
if you really get walloped –
you might ask yourself
what you are going to do with the catastrophe you were
born into,
that fear stuck in your throat.

You may reject
the battle for justice over comfort
for the siren call of means and the road to power,
itching for their answer.

Yeah, you can settle for less than what you hope for.

Or you can step to the precipice,
quit that place, seek a generous world,
find those a little rough around the edges
and ask to be taken in.

*J. A. Forgione
Bronx, NY*



10,000 Sunshines

Regardless of what environment you find yourself in,
you are always in control of your destiny.

Despite your bloodline,
you can be anything you want to be.
Despite your wallet size,
you can still cross the finish line.

True success is only those who
have a calm mind,
a kind heart,
and a smile of 10,000 sunshines.

After all, haven't you heard?
The only thing you take with you to your next lifetime,
is your spiritual growth,
not your bank account.

*Gary Samuel Bogle
Brooklyn, NY*

Harmony - Advice from the Ancestors

I am in a circle of many circles.
Under thatched roof. Within a round room dense with people.
Lots of people. Generations of people.

Fire smoking from the center.

A tiny woman sits closest to the stones.
She is the Conductor of Breath.
Smoke rises to follow her staff topped by a raven.
The smoke continues to rise up.

Ancestors are humming, chanting, creating new currents in the air.
The committee discussion will soon begin.

*"Make the sound!" The sound of a drum hisses across the room.
Then begins a slow thump-thump, thump-thump.
The sound of a heart beat. Slow. Steady.
The sound of the Mother's Heart to an unborn baby.*

Ancestors are stirring my blood, rising from my bones.
The heels of my feet softly pound the beaten ground.
My hands shake the beads. In dance we begin to commune.

They share in song.
Tonal sounds - high and low.
Pleasant while difficult to find truly appealing.
Familiar. Family, I wonder out loud,
*"How ugly are we to you?
How badly are we messing up?"*
Typical. The Ancestors laugh at me.
"You are funny!" and
"So naive, don't you trust yourself?" sounds of disapproval.
"Sing! Dance! Pray! Are you doing this enough?"
Also typical. The Ancestors don't answer direct questions.
I wonder how this is helpful and press on,
"How do we achieve social harmony? What does it look like?"

We sing and chant and dance for several hours, and several days it seems. Tears of joy and sweat commingle. At this time, The Tiny Woman breathes into me, my lungs burning, my heart aches.
"Don't let fear guide your decisions."

Maitri Butcher
NY, NY



September 16 & 23, 2021 Writing Prompts

September 16:

Creation of a Cento poem by compiling writers' comments posted in chat in response to 9.2.21 and 9.9.21 writing prompts.

September 23:

"When I sit down to write a book, I do not say to myself, 'I am going to produce a work of art.' I write it because there is some lie that I want to expose, some fact to which I want to draw attention, and my initial concern is to get a hearing."

-George Orwell, Why I Write (1946) is an essay by George Orwell detailing his personal journey to becoming a writer.

WRITING GENRES

Op-Ed

Maisie Sparks

Poetry

Hylde Clarke, J. A. Forgione

Memoir

Michele Linton

Group Study Guide

Luvon Roberson

Partisan politics makes for poor parenting

Earlier this year, when I heard that the U.S. Senate had acquitted the former president of incitement of insurrection against the U.S. government, it reminded me of the time my older son borrowed the car of his friend's parents and totaled it. Suffice it to say, I'm thankful no one was hurt, but there's a city bus with quite a harrowing story to tell. While auto insurance replaced that family's car, they had a deductible to pay. And my son would need an attorney to represent him in court.

Like any parent, I always wanted to help my kids, but what would help look like in this situation? I decided that help would mean he'd have to pay that family's deductible and the cost of an attorney from his high school graduation money. I didn't want to be that parent who pays for their kid's mistakes. I had another son who was watching. If I cracked under the pressure of this defining parental moment, it could come back to haunt me.

So, you ask, what in tarnation does a kid having a car wreck have to do with an impeachment trial and a House Select Committee? Well, it's a cautionary tale intended to help us realize when we have to put partisan politics aside and get on with the really hard work of governing known as parenting. If a parent doesn't let a child feel the weight of his actions, said child and other children will think that they can get away with stuff. These are teachable moments, meant to keep said child and others from trying wild, impeachable, and deadly ideas.

Some Congressional folks don't understand this basic parenting principle. They refuse to make the connections among a former president's words, insurrectionists and state legislatures making laws to keep voting "safe" while disenfranchising certain voters.

The cockamamie poor-parenting arguments made over the past year would be hilarious if they were part of an SNL skit. "Well, he's now living with his grandparents in Florida; he's not in our house anymore, so it doesn't matter what he did." Or they mutter, "if we say anything, we'll upset him and his friends, and they won't vote for – I mean visit – us anymore."

Those are silly excuses, so let me give you a scary one, "it's not his fault; we've always tried to protect him from the truth. We just never dreamed he'd try to kill us!" That tragic reality should jar poor parents out of their stupor and help them establish healthy boundaries.

Responsible parents resist the urge to turn a blind eye to the painfully obvious. They take the tough love approach. They tell their child, "We can't afford for your friends to ransack our house again. Play nice and don't kill the Capitol police."

May democracy be saved from those who have been enriched by their elected positions and are poverty-stricken when it comes to good parenting.

*Maisie Sparks
Champaign, IL*



From potential to power: An invitation to American Christians

When I was growing up, I learned from Scripture that God is good and generous. Each of us can have as much of God as we want. And when I was growing up, I also learned that I can't be with God when I'm with people who don't share my skin color.

As I write those words, they sound crazy. But that's the crazy cloud that overshadowed my thinking as I was growing up because it's the dark and very real cloud that has hung over America's faith traditions for their entire history. That's why nearly every brand of American Christianity has black-, white-, red-, and yellow-colored churches.

"Colored" Christianity offers a shared set of beliefs but does not invite us to a shared set of behaviors that have the power to allow engagement with the other, both in church and in the community. This has been and continues to be fact: eleven o'clock Sunday morning is the most segregated hour in the American week.

Black, white, red, or yellow, we all have been denied the gifts of others. Some years ago, I read *Divided by Faith*, by Michael Emerson. He summed up the situation this way, evangelicals focus on evangelism and discipleship; they tend to avoid rocking the boat of the larger culture. "Evangelicals fail to challenge the system," he said, "not just out of concern for evangelism, but also because they support the American system and enjoy its fruits. They share the Protestant work ethic, support laissez-faire economics and sometimes fail to evaluate whether the social system is consistent with their Christianity."**

Now, Emerson was talking about white evangelicals. But as a black evangelical, I lived out those same beliefs in the way good black people do. First, by being compliant – that's the don't rock the boat part. I believed that if a person worked hard, they would do well – that's the Protestant work ethic part. And, I failed to challenge destructive social systems, praying about making it to heaven, but not working for God's kingdom to come on earth. I was not concerned with changing the social system as much as trying to survive it. I was content that in God's eyes I was equal and that was good enough.

Yes, it's good enough, and it's not enough. Both are true. That's the tension every American Christian suppresses every Sunday morning. If our Christian beliefs don't transform our behaviors and allow us to see the image of God in every human being, then our beliefs are part of the problem.

What could be a more powerful witness to the abundant goodness of God than for American Christians to worship across racial lines? That's the invitation. Will we accept it?

We can love each other as much as we want.

Maisie Sparks
Champaign, IL

** Michael O. Emerson, Christian Smith. (Oxford University Press, 2001). *Divided by Faith: Evangelical Religion and the Problem of Race in America*.



Blue and Gold

Our dignity is ours,
inherent. Work is
its own expression, invisible or seen, chosen or forced.
We shackle – or others do – ourselves to it,
made chattel.
Bells that ended classes, aping the factory's meting out of shifts –
now emails ding after 1 AM.
For what are we being trained, where are we being led?
Not heaven.
Hours, hours, hours
better spent
on what our spirits and bodies
would have wanted, but
instead:
Work is the highest good! Do your job! TGIF!
(Though who doesn't work on the weekend?)
The reward for work is more work!
Just writing this exhausts me.

Before we ever cashed a paycheck,
when we suckled, dug holes in mud, caught a ball,
we wore the inner garment that is dignity.
Children want to know – do we? –

Why isn't our job instead
to mend the poisoned ground,
net up the ocean's flood of plastic,
wash the firmament so all rejoice and wonder at
its blue and gold.

J. A. Forgione
Bronx, NY



EXCOR!

There are those who

deplore the eternal conflict
abhor violence, hate war
detest killing, coups d'état
ethnic cleansing, condemn
aggression, territorial and
rights violations, decry
protest and dissent unless
it is of their doing.

These,

With prompt outcries, harsh
judgments, denunciations and
too often studied, cruel retaliation
for imagined or perceived
infractions; maintaining the forever
hold on vendettas old and new
flaunting wealth, assumed entitlement
self-bestowed, embellished privilege
wave their colors, symbols; sickle, cross,
stars, crescent, stripes, disc embossed
standards, claim exceptional status
parade budget busting weaponry
of blast, burn, poison and with
specious justification blame (childish
finger pointing) inflict horror
suffering, terror and death upon
those others, innocents and children
included their destruction, referenced
as collateral.

Chest thumping,

mission accomplished. With bulging
pockets and cowering beneath their
waving bright white banner quickly
unfurled and thrust high, the
convenient, tired old maxim in bold
print: "Two wrongs don't make a right."

Further

in multi-leveled gatherings, they

lament in orgies of grief for injuries
and destruction suffered in turn,
disown their provocations and
complicity's truth, but rush to
self-exoneration, blessings, adulation
sparkling glorification, awards,
compensation and grandiose
memorialization of their losses, instead.

There are those who

fail to evolve to level humane
development arrested at hegemony
embrace; cling with fear, paranoia and
desperation to status quo, back stepping
or worse, savagery, prolong ignorance,
suffering and dying, self-detriment
notwithstanding.

With utter gall, proffer

face saving lies of causation and need in
guilt denial, sorry attempts at self
convincing while stage setting repetitive
action when desired, ignoring loss of
standing before God and the world.

Truth and justice intertwined

Illumination in steady high beam
unavoidable, undeniable speak:

future, the eternal destination
resident in every moment, one
direction only and change embedded.
The "go to" generational scourges:
domination, oppression, manipulation
exploitation, bullying, suppression, lies;
unjust, obsolete, wrong here, now and
I in space time, outdated relics of the past
acknowledged moral failures finally
shed, doffed along the way,
constituent nevermore!

*Hylda Clarke
Harlem, NY*



Bronx Island Girl

My family is made up of all types of strivers, stragglers, and shady characters. I was born in the island nation of Jamaica. If you're an immigrant child, the sense of trauma and abandonment is compounded. The year I was born, major civil rights events occurred throughout the American South. That same year troops were sent to Vietnam to begin the Vietnam War.

Jamaica got its independence in 1962, and six years later my mother, an educated teacher, decided that there was no opportunity for her in Jamaica. She boarded a plane and immigrated to New York to work as a nanny for a wealthy Westchester family. My father, a police officer charged with guarding the Prime Minister of Jamaica, followed the next year, and became a security guard at New York Hospital. My sister and I came with my grandfather two years later.

When I ask my mother what happened during that period she never responds to my question. The response I get is usually "we were trying to do better than what we had when I was growing up." Her era was the Depression/WW II era. Sometimes the response I get is, "I was trying to leave your father." I think that is unacceptable to share with your child.

The era I grew up was called a latch key kids era. When I came home no adults were there. It was quite different from what Mrs. Cleaver or even Mrs. Huxtable was doing on television for their pretend children. There was no meal waiting or warm hugs. I had to cook ground turkey or chicken. Despite this, the fabric of my family was strong, and I was happy for that. The family ties were so strong that well into my adolescent years, when other striving relatives would come up from Jamaica for temporary visits, my sister and I would double up to give them sleeping space. Now those scarifies are not remembered by my then-distant cousins.

When my parents moved from being working class immigrants to more middle-class immigrants we moved from an apartment in the Central Bronx into our own home in the Bronx, and both my parents bought automobiles. My father says when he visited a friend who moved up to the Wakefield section of the Northeast Bronx he could hear birds singing, see stars in the night skies, and feel the cool breeze as the trees swayed in the wind. He knew he wanted to move his family up to this community. It was very different from the desolate streetscape of the Parkchester/Rosewood where we lived.

We were one of the first Caribbean families to move to that area. As a result, we integrated the public school we attended. We stood out. Our music, food, hair styles, and clothes were very different. The school yard talk was about the Knights of Columbus fighting the Black Spades. Always racial. Always so hard. That's what I remember a lot about growing up.

*Michele Linton
Harlem, NY*



Creating Space for Social Justice & Healing

A longtime champion of protest via the arts, I developed the small group study “Creating Space for Social Justice & Healing via Arts/Creativity & Public Performance,” which met for the first time in April, 2020. The group study focuses on how protest, resistance, and justice-inspired art/creativity can expose lies and injustice, bringing change and increased accountability. In other words, how people, informed by learning of the lies - often-hidden stories and history - can be empowered by their creative action and moved to ignite change.

This small group study aligns past history with current realities of health inequities and disparities based on racism. We began meeting just as the COVID pandemic forced the entire world into lockdown. Clearly, that was a time of fear, loss, suffering, depression. And, just as clearly, much-needed time for “Creating Space for Social Justice & Healing.”

We met for reunion and reflection in April, 2021. I invite you to create space for social justice and healing by forming a small group. To that end, I share the 8-week program I created:

Creating Space for Social Justice & Healing via Arts / Creativity & Public Performance

Week 1 Assignment / Our Focus: Find a news story, art, or public policy.

Our Creative / Arts Response: TODAY in 2020: JUAN SANABRIA dies due to COVID-19: Shining Light on Healthcare Disparities. Share a COVID-19 story, artwork, or public policy initiative.

Week 2 Assignment / Our Focus: Reading/Video

Our Creative / Arts Response: THEN in 1932: Tuskegee Syphilis Study/U.S. Public Health Service. *Contributions of 600 Black men to science/medicine.* Draft a poem, song, drawing, music, journal, photo, or public policy initiative.

Week 3 Assignment / Our Focus: Reading/Video - <https://www.npr.org/2010/02/02/123232331/henrietta-lacks-a-donors-immortal-legacy>

Our Creative / Arts Response: THEN in 1951: Henrietta Lacks: “Mother of Modern Medicine.” *Her HeLa cells still growing, still saving lives worldwide.* Draft a letter to Henrietta Lacks or her family or to the researchers.

Week 4 Assignment / Our Focus: Performance: Sharing your collection.

Our Creative / Arts Response: COVID-19, Tuskegee Syphilis Study, Henrietta Lacks: What We Learned & Our Creative/Arts Response. Compile your creative/arts/public policy responses into a collection.

Creating Space for Social Justice & Healing

Week 5 Assignment / Our Focus: News Reports/Video

Our Creative / Arts Response: TODAY Meets THEN: Dr. Marion Sims/Anarcha, Betsey, & Lucy -- & all unnamed enslaved Black women & poor Irish immigrant women. Bring news story, artwork, or public policy initiative to share.

Week 6 Assignment / Our Focus: Reading “Luna Sisters: A Choreo-Narrative, as memorial to Anarcha, Betsey, & Lucy and all unnamed women,” by L. Roberson.

Our Creative / Arts Response: Dr. Sims/Anarcha, Betsey, & Lucy. Draft your own creative/arts or public policy initiative response to “Luna Sisters: A Choreo-Narrative,” by L. Roberson.

Week 7 Assignment / Our Focus: Reading news reports/watch videos

Our Creative / Arts Response: Dr. Sims/Anarcha, Betsey, & Lucy and all the unnamed enslaved Black women and poor Irish immigrant women. Draft your own or find poem, song, drawing, music, journal, photo, or public policy.

Week 8 Assignment / Our Focus: Performance: Compiling all stories/history into one collection.

Our Creative / Arts Response: COVID-19/Tuskegee Syphilis Study/Henrietta Lacks/Anarcha, Betsey, & Lucy and all unnamed enslaved Black women & poor Irish immigrant women. *History/Story We Know & Our Creative/Arts Response:* Compile responses into one collection. Discuss next steps for public performance.

Luvon Roberson
Harlem, NY





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