

# Sacred Basket: Reflections on Facilitating Black Women's Self-Love Retreats

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*When the U.S. seemed to disintegrate in 2020 from the Covid-19 pandemic and the ongoing murders of unarmed Black people by the police, my fear levels rose dramatically, and understandably so. Like other Black women, I experienced intersectional oppressions including, but not limited to, racism and sexism. I needed to shore up my inner strength.*

*In this essay I discuss online retreats that I have been facilitating for Black women since September 2020. I describe my approach to the retreats, how participants have responded to them, and the community that has developed through them. The retreats are healing spaces that offer Black women contemplative themes and practices to explore in community. And through contemplative practices, the retreats increase Black women's self-love, which helps dismantle their internalized oppression by offering them more accurate—and beautiful—images of self. These images shift their inner experience, which then shifts their external experiences.*

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*This is not a time to live without a practice. It is a time when all of us will need the most faithful, self-generated enthusiasm (enthusiasm: to be filled with god) in order to survive in human fashion. Whether we reach this inner state of recognized divinity through prayer, meditation, dancing, swimming, walking, feeding the hungry or enriching the impoverished is immaterial. We will be doubly bereft without some form of practice that connects us, in a caring way, to what begins to feel like a dissolving world.*

—Alice Walker

When much of the world shut down in March 2020 because of the Covid-19 pandemic, and as this country seemed to disintegrate with the ongoing murders of unarmed Black people by the police, it was clear to me that I needed to shore up my inner strength. My fear levels rose dramatically, and understandably so. The challenges Black women face are among the greatest challenges faced by anyone in U.S. society. We are subject to intersectional oppressions including, but not limited to, racism and sexism. To find relief, I sought readings and podcasts and intensified my own contemplative practices. I soon realized that other Black women were looking for help as well, and that I had something to offer.

I believe there are two fundamental ways to dismantle racism. One way is for White people to acknowledge and confront individual and systemic racism. The other way is for Black people to heal their own internalized oppression. My approach to ending racist and other forms of oppression experienced by Black people is to work to increase Black self-love. I would argue that everyone in this country has imbibed White supremacist/anti-Black thinking, that it is in the water we drink and the air we breathe. It either impacts us with internalized superiority or internalized inferiority, depending on the bodies we are in. By helping Black people experience radical self-acceptance and let go of the self-hatred that comes with facing ongoing racist oppression, I help dismantle the psychic impact of that oppression. And by reducing the psychic impact, I help Black people live as free beings. By living as free beings, we experience and produce a change in energy—within ourselves and around us. Quantum physics tells us that the act of observing an experiment alters its outcome. Our presence affects what is. So, a change in how we see and feel about ourselves affects how we move about in the world and how others see and interact with us. Changing our inner reality helps change our outer reality. And although Black women are not responsible for ending racism, freeing ourselves internally enables us to experience more freedom in the outer world—no matter what is happening. Our willful free living erodes the energetic basis for oppression and helps dissolve racism.

In late March 2020 I offered a 90-minute mini retreat on Zoom, and in May a daylong retreat. These retreats confirmed what I knew: that

people needed time to turn within for healing, and people needed to do this inner work in the company of others doing their own inner work. In August I facilitated another daylong retreat—this one specifically for Black women. The response was so overwhelmingly positive that I decided to offer a series of mini retreats on self-love for Black women. Each month since September 2020 I have been facilitating a mini retreat on self-love for Black women, beautiful occasions for Black women to engage in contemplative practices and to do their own inner work in community. What I offer are Courage & Renewal retreats.

## **Background**

I have been a Courage & Renewal (C&R) facilitator since 2007. The Center for Courage & Renewal was founded on the work of Parker J. Palmer, whose writings and retreats help people to live what he calls “undivided lives,” lives in which their work and their values—their soul and role—are in alignment. Living this way requires deep introspection, a kind of work that is not part of most people’s growth and development experiences. C&R Circles of Trust<sup>®</sup>, however, provide spaces for people to do this inner work, what we might call soul work, as well as principles and practices to support it. The main role of the C&R facilitator is to create and hold space that is free enough for individuals to do their inner exploration but with enough boundaries for them to feel comfortable being vulnerable. The C&R principles and practices that guide facilitators help make this possible. For this essay, I want to lift up three principles relating to introspection that apply, generally, to human beings. An individual’s deep inner work is done best (a) in community, (b) through “third things,” and (c) by connecting with their Inner Teacher.

The relationship between the individual and the community is the cornerstone of the principle of community. The idea behind this is that inner work is hard, and we need the support of others to engage in it. In addition, sometimes in speaking to others, we hear ourselves more clearly. Speaking out loud can help us know or understand what we think or feel more fully. And finally, there may be things that others see in us that we cannot see in ourselves. The mirroring we receive from others can offer us important information.

Indeed, a beautiful community has formed. Although the number of participants is lower now than it was in September 2020, each retreat has about 20 women.

The second principle acknowledges that we may need to connect with our inner wisdom indirectly. Sometimes, if asked directly what we feel about a certain thing we cannot answer from our depths. Instead, in journaling in response to reflection questions about something else—a “third thing,” such as a poem, a visual image, a story, or a song—our deep inner understandings reveal themselves.

The third principle is the idea that we each have an Inner Teacher—or Inner Wisdom, Inner Self, Soul. This means that each person has the answers they need within. In C&R retreats, we offer space and questions to help participants access their inner guidance, but we refrain from offering advice to others or trying to fix them. There are places for advice giving, but C&R retreats are not the place.

### **The Retreats**

The Black women’s self-love retreats are contemplative experiences. They are designed to move participants from engagement with the external world into a space of inner exploration. From their experiences of inner reflection, participants have opportunities to share in small and large groups—and receive mirroring from other participants—so that they can more readily identify what they have received and what they need to remember as they return to their daily lives.

The first part of each retreat, which I conduct on Zoom, is what I call “creating the container.” After welcoming everyone, I acknowledge the Indigenous peoples who once populated the lands where we all are, as well as our African Ancestors, then offer a poem, song or quote and a few moments of silence to move us into retreat. From there we have introductions—invitations for participants to speak uninterrupted for three to four minutes in a breakout room with two or three other participants. These are not typical workplace introductions. I invite people to share their name and anything they’d like in response to a prompt such as: Share the season of life you’re in or what the poem or quote brings up in you.

Over time, the introductions have become more like check-ins as repeat attendees have formed a trusting community. The prompts invite folks to check in with their hearts and then share with others who are engaged in active listening. There is no back and forth conversation during the introductions or check-ins. This is a rare opportunity for people to speak for several minutes as others hold space for them and simply listen. It is not often that we are afforded such a luxury in our daily lives, so this practice is precious.

After the check-ins, I share my intention for the retreat, offer an overview of the schedule for the day, and invite different voices to read the Boundary Markers, our community agreements. In each retreat I also make the same housekeeping comments. I invite people to engage in each retreat as if we are sitting in a circle with a candle and flowers on a table in the center of the circle, and to keep their video on, if possible. My intention is that, despite the Zoom format, we each interact with living persons, and not their names and photos.

I then talk about silence. Black women have often felt silenced in our White supremacist, patriarchal world. And in U.S. society, silence is often a form of punishment. So, I acknowledge that people may have negative experiences or associations with silence. I share my own love of silence and the spiritual connection I find there, and encourage people to engage with silence as much as they can, inviting them to substitute other words, such as quiet or stillness, if they prefer. I also remind them that in my retreats everything is invitational, so if they are not comfortable with stillness or silence they don't have to engage in those experiences.

One more bit of housekeeping contributes to participants' ease in the retreats. I teach at a Black women's college, where students are often told, "This place was made for you." They are reminded that they do not need to carve out a space for themselves in a White patriarchal world; the college is a Black woman's space. I offer that phrase, as a reminder to returning participants and as a welcome to new retreatants. I welcome them and invite them to make themselves at home, not just because they are at home, but because this retreat was made for them.

The last part of creating the container is engaging in a contemplative practice, usually meditation. After that we are ready to move into the heart of the retreat.

Each retreat has a theme that we explore through a multi-part experience usually including reflection, creation, and sharing. Among the retreat themes have been: *My Unique and Wonderful Gifts*, *What My Soul Wants for Me*, *Aligning with the Universe Through Gratitude*, *The Wonder of My Body*, and *Loving Myself Radically*. And each retreat focuses on a particular contemplative practice, such as meditation, soul journaling, gratitude as a practice, observation, or movement.

I have been impressed by the women's engagement and often thank them for being so "game." By this I mean that some of the activities that I invite them to participate in may challenge their comfort levels. The women who find their way to my retreats tend to be comfortable with contemplative practices. They are from different walks of life and different generations, and may not have an ongoing meditation practice, but they are willing to engage in stillness and the other things I invite them to do. Their engagement, the ways they give themselves to the exercises, and the depth of their experiences are profound. This is evident in things they share in the large group and in closing circles, which reveal them to be open, forthright, vulnerable, and deeply moved.

### **What Happens**

With Zoom, one might have expected a contemplative retreat to be challenging for participants. Without the energy of face-to-face interactions and with the possible discomfort of sitting at a computer screen—and facing the reality of Zoom fatigue—I wondered if participants would not be able to connect deeply with others. In fact, the opposite has been true. The virtual environment has been a benefit in several ways. First, holding the retreats online has increased access to them; they are more accessible because participants do not have travel or lodging expenses. And there are women in the retreats from all over the world. Some women have reported feeling greater comfort because they are in their own homes. This makes it easier for them to relate to, interact with, and connect with others. And the Zoom breakout rooms allow participants

to interact in small groups, which also contributes to feelings of connection. The virtual platform has also changed participants' experiences with some exercises that I have offered in in-person retreats.

In one exercise that I use to help people experience the relationship between seeing and knowing, I invite participants to look deeply into another person's eyes as they draw a picture of them. The exercise is not about skillful drawing; the instructions are to avoid looking at the paper or lifting the pen or pencil from the paper while drawing. It is about being fully present in the act of seeing. Some people find looking closely into another person's eyes—especially while engaging in an “art” activity—to be very uncomfortable. When engaging in this exercise in person, sometimes people look away, laugh, or otherwise demonstrate their discomfort. On Zoom, however, no one knows if anyone is looking at them. Although participants chose and *pin* a “partner,” everyone remained in the main Zoom room, so individuals did not know that someone had chosen them as a partner and was looking at them closely. There may have been some discomfort with drawing, but the looking was not problematic, and Zoom participants could look more deeply into their “partner's” eyes as they drew.

One participant offered her gratitude for this exercise. Her comments captured the goal of the retreats.

Your design was perfect. I loved how it built layer by layer from the introductions tied into the seasons, to the poem... the song, the wonderful pictures, our break-out groups and our drawings and finally to the crescendo at the end after our drawing when you said that “the beauty we capture in someone else is the beauty within ourselves.” It made so much sense and created such warm, heartfelt and affirming feelings within. I can't say enough good things, except thank you. It was an absolutely wonderful design.

In another retreat, I invited participants to dance as a form of meditative movement. I played meditative drumming music and asked everyone to turn off their videos, so no one could see anyone else danc-

ing, and to move however they were inclined to do. Often people are self-conscious about dancing, but the virtual platform eliminated such discomfort. Participants were very enthusiastic about the dancing and the drawing experiences. They felt that they got to know someone better through the seeing and drawing exercise, and some who did not dance regularly reported that they loved moving.

The retreats have been a resounding success. Women are deeply engaged, and their heartfelt words make it clear that powerful experiences are taking place. In one retreat a woman said—and not for the first time—“I know I say every retreat was the best one, but this one really was!” Another woman wrote about how the retreats are important to her in a particular way.

I came upon the retreat accidentally in Summer last year as I was looking up another event and it was there in my suggestions. There are no coincidences, this was meant to be. I have attended every single retreat since the first one. It is a monthly dose of me time with sistas across the Atlantic (I am UK based). I have loved the diversity of ages at the retreat and the different focus each month. I am so pleased to have embraced this as part of my current self-love routine.

I am especially moved by her last words; my retreats are part of her *self-love routine*. Another woman spoke about the retreats in a similar way, referring to the self-care aspects.

It's clear you know us, what it's like feeling “... sick and tired of being sick and tired”! There is nothing frivolous or self-indulgent for needing self-care space, among sisters gathered in the circle, you thoughtfully, lovingly sustain ... The reliability, simplicity of the agenda, a graceful structure focusing individual and collective listening. Reflective, inspirational, soul-grounding content, conveyed via visual imagery, prose, poetry and song, it all works together.

An important part of the self-love and self-care that these two women value is the strong and supportive community that has evolved. It is heartwarming to see the same women in the Zoom room month after month, along with new women that participants have invited to the retreats, as well as those that discover them on their own. Some women knew each other before the retreats, sometimes signing up for them together, but I have enjoyed watching people get to know others. Perhaps it is the community agreements or perhaps it is simply delight in being in an environment in which no elaborate explanations or justifications are needed in order to be understood, but an easeful respect characterizes participants' interactions. And because our focus is on moving toward what we want, not away from what we don't want, there is a lighthearted and warm feeling to the retreats. Women feel supported by the others in the retreat.

To me, the most important part of the retreats is not that the women have a good time, but that they feel better about themselves. Loving themselves more fully enables them to let go of the internalized oppression that results from the negative messaging Black women receive from the external world through various forms of media, in schools and places of worship, even within Black families. It is virtually impossible for a Black person to grow up in this country without internalizing some notion of inferiority, just as it is virtually impossible for a White person to grow up in this country without internalizing some illusion of superiority. One of my intentions in each retreat is to offer practices and experiences that help participants love themselves and that they can return to as needed.

### **My Approach**

The term "Black girl magic," coined several years ago by CaShawn Thompson, has become a common part of our language today. It refers to the wonderful capabilities, accomplishments, or experiences of Black women and girls, despite racist, sexist oppression. I think of the retreats as having Black girl magic because something inexplicable seems to happen that leads to profound and wonderful experiences in participants and to the beautiful community that has evolved. Over the past year and a half I have found myself saying that facilitating retreats

is my superpower. I am always quick to add that this statement is not made from ego. But something happens to cause retreat participants to respond enthusiastically to the retreats that I facilitate. I believe it is because somehow I have connected with Source or the Ancestors, somehow I am a vessel or conduit through which particular energy reaches retreatants and enables them to connect to their own inner wisdom, which is profound.

I have long believed the answers to all our problems are spiritual. In my view, although we are humans existing on Earth, that is not the totality of who we are. We are spiritual beings having human experiences. The Divine exists within each of us. Because of this, I believe we have access to energy or power or assistance on other planes or dimensions that can help us navigate what we encounter here on Earth. We connect with this energy by turning within. When we do, strength, insights, creativity, and direction are available to us. In aligning with the power of the Universe, our efforts bear the best fruit.

Simply taking a spiritual approach is not enough, however. In some White contemplative circles, individuals don't see the importance of acknowledging or addressing individual or systemic racist oppression. They may argue that the Power of the Universe has no color, race, or gender, therefore there is no reason to give color, race, or gender—or any other defining factors of human beings—any special significance. The argument is that “God’s got this,” and all humans need to do is to pray, meditate, or engage in other spiritual practices and wait while the Divine works things out. Known as spiritual bypassing, this way of thinking enables White contemplatives to feel that their spiritual practices alone fulfill their responsibilities in addressing some of the complex problems of today.

However, if I accept that the Divine has no color, race, or gender—which I do—yet, know that we are all divine beings existing in human bodies—with color, race, and gender—then I’m clear that another approach is required. A truer approach means that we move about as divine beings in raced and gendered bodies. So, rather than existing as if our race and gender do not matter or as if we are powerless to affect change, we must recognize that we are raceless and genderless divine

beings living in raced and gendered human forms. The key to navigating that paradoxical situation is to turn within, to hear how our raceless and genderless divine Self guides us to live as raced and gendered humans. This is what I call living on the Mobius strip. We turn to the inner world to connect with our true selves, which gives us the ability to engage with the external world in authentic ways. Once turning within enables us to truly *be*, then we know what to *do*.

During my own reflective efforts to discover my Soul's purpose, the image of a sacred basket arose as a metaphor for my retreat work. There are several ways that this image captures what I aim to do. I believe all inner work connects us to the Divine within, so my starting place is sacred. Like a strong basket, I hold space for the women to do their work. The porous nature of a basket allows what is no longer needed or the pain of hardships to fall through, so that the burdens women are carrying around are lightened through the retreat. I also think baskets are a wonderful symbol of my facilitation because they are beautiful. And Black women deserve to be surrounded by beauty and to be reminded of our own beauty.

One of the blessings of the pandemic has been the ability and space to connect with others through technology. This has enabled me to offer my gifts to many more people than I would have been able to reach otherwise. Holding Black women in beauty and helping them to see their own beauty is important work. It is radical work. My retreats, steeped as they are in contemplative practices, increase Black women's self-love. They counter the negative images about Black women that have been presented to the world and accepted as truth. With clearer, more authentic views of themselves as valuable and worthy and beautiful, Black women are freer from the various forms of internalized oppression. In moving about the world as free individuals, their presence brings about an energetic shift that erodes the foundations on which racism and other forms of oppressive stand. Thus, dismantling their own internalized oppression helps dismantle racism.

## References

- Walker, A. (2006). *We are the ones we have been waiting for: Inner light in a time of darkness*. The New Press.