

GLIMMERS

Essays on Race
and Historical Trauma,
the Origins of Compassionate
Dialogue, and Power of
Unconditional Love

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Glimmers: Essays on Race and Historical Trauma, the Origins of
Compassionate Dialogue, and Power of Unconditional Love

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This is a love letter to my grandma, Vendora, who was the anchor in every storm. To my mother, Janice, who challenged limitations and expectations. To my siblings, Billy, Ricky, Ray, and Dora, for being the mirrors and the way. And to the rest of my beautifully expansive village that has supported me to reach this moment.



Vendora Childs, born in 1912 in Alabama

INTRODUCTION

To go back and get it.



That's the loose translation of the symbolism of the Sankofa Bird from Ghanaian culture, and it's always spoken to me. Inherent within it is this idea that we honor our ancestors, and we honor the work they did to get us here, which is a big part of why we're looking back. To acknowledge all the work that has happened so that we're able to even start where we are. In this way, it is not only a beautiful symbol of the diaspora but also a teacher. Though the bird is moving forward, its head is turned back and holding a precious egg. One of my favorite encapsulations of this symbolism is "Sankofa is a phrase that encourages learning from

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the past to inform the future, reaching back to move forward, and lifting as we climb” (Stockton, n.d.).

I’ve generally found that people like to leave the past in the past. Sometimes, in some situations, that can work. But this book explores another big idea: unexamined, putting away the past isn’t always in our best interest. The truth is that addressing and healing the past is how we truly get the future we want.

This intentional reflection and introspection—that is, examining how our lived experiences have impacted us and ultimately influenced who we are today—is core to how I live my life. It’s core to why I’m sharing stories about what came before and how those things have informed my path. Especially early on, as a young professional working with students in underserved schools, there were so many times I looked around and thought, *There has to be a better way than the way we’re doing this*. As my thinking evolved, I realized that the possibility of a “better way” wasn’t limited to the education system; it was possible across a whole range of systems and relationships, including our relationships with ourselves. Out of that recognition came Compassionate Dialogue®, a framework I developed that empowers us to be fully and authentically ourselves, even when things get uncomfortable. Compassionate Dialogue resonates with so many people because sometimes we’re not even aware of what we’re carrying around unresolved until we learn to check in internally in a way that’s full-on and honest. It’s beautiful because not only does it guide us through problems and conflict, but it also shows us how to move forward with empathy and curiosity for ourselves and others. It is that “better way” I knew was possible early on, built into a structure that’s strong enough to hold our complexities

and vast enough to acknowledge the range of complexities in others.¹ As I look back now, I can see that Compassionate Dialogue—specifically The Recognize, Interrupt, Repair (RIR) Protocol™ we use to put it into action—has been alive in me for many years. I see its fingerprints on so many of my memories before I had a name for it.

I think of Compassionate Dialogue as a North Star for how to live a full and honest life: recognizing how our emotions affect our actions, trusting our intuition, having the confidence to lean into fear, setting boundaries, and advocating for ourselves while also giving ourselves grace and others grace. It's all those things and more.

But, as Sankofa shows us, moving forward starts by looking back. It is only when we revisit what has happened to us and how it has shaped our thoughts and behaviors that we can begin to change if we want to. In moments of struggle or discomfort, we can say, “I know where that’s coming from. I know why, and I can heal, forgive, or set a necessary boundary.” If we come from a place of seeking to understand, we can give this gift not only to ourselves but to others. This is so important because that’s how we break cycles and create new paths. Once we understand, we have the opportunity to forgive, which is the next step toward healing and growing.

Let me be explicit here: this is not about forced forgiveness, forgetting injustice or wrongdoing, or giving people or systems “a pass.” Instead, it’s about releasing their stranglehold on us so we can acknowledge that pain and move forward in a way

1 For more, read *The Compassionate Dialogue Journey: A Workbook for Growth and Self-Discovery*.

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that gives us more consciousness around our actions, decisions, and futures.

This is especially true if you're carrying around the historical trauma so many Black, Brown, or marginalized families have experienced over decades of violence, systematic oppression, over-policing, discriminatory economic and social policies, high recidivism rates, and demeaning cultural narratives. This is just the tip of the iceberg; I could go on. The point here is to be explicit about *not* oversimplifying the weight of this history on our present and our future.

Though that historical trauma certainly exists, it's also true that my life has been filled with abundance, kindness, and joy. Life-changing educators, coaches, and mentors. Family members who have had my back unconditionally, even when things were tough. Friends who have lifted me in a million ways.

This is, in many ways, the crux of this book. It's about how my twin sister and I, with the help of some of our family members and others who supported us, were able to change our circumstances. That didn't happen on its own. In fact, it *could not* have happened on its own. It took a village to provide that support—an example of why community is so important when we're talking about growth and breaking cycles. Our "village" proved, time and time again, that they were willing to give their time, resources, and attention and, at times, challenge their own perceptions. The life-changing part is in that sacrifice. It's in people laying something on the line for us, even when they absolutely didn't have to, even when they didn't always have a lot to lay. The sacrifice became evidence of their belief that there was something more to my sister and me than what the narratives

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would have you believe, which meant everything to us. Today, you and I have the power to give that gift, too, but only if we first look back to acknowledge which parts of ourselves and our communities need the most healing.

Rather than being ashamed of our lived experiences, following the Sankofa means we can talk about them and learn from them. We can see them as building blocks. I know for a fact that I'm where I am today because of the experiences I had early on.

When I look back on my life, I see so much beauty. That's what this book is for: to move through moments that glimmer in the light of hindsight. This book is an invitation to say, "We've all had painful experiences, but they don't have to dictate what we can do and what we can achieve." The only way forward is to look back at our experiences and move through what comes up so we can heal it. My hope is that, as you read, you'll remember the wisdom of the Sankofa and practice your own self-reflection. This is how we begin to heal, not only ourselves, but our world.

PART I

WHERE IT ALL BEGAN

We do not hope for no reason. Hope is the reason for itself.

– Amanda Gorman, *Call Us What We Carry*



My first home was in California—first in Inglewood and later, a house in West Hollywood. We had enough space for a dog, even though we didn't have grass in the backyard. We were poor but fed and cared for. We were sometimes left to fend for ourselves, but we were never alone. We were sometimes punished harshly, but we knew we were loved.

There's a lot more to the story.



Grandma with Mom on her lap. Columbus, Ohio, 1942

THE WHOOPIN'

Rethinking Corporal Punishment and Generational Trauma

Once, when I was eight or nine, Dora and I were at our elementary school on a weekend. It was the spot where all the kids gathered to hang. As we played with the other kids and watched the older skaters, someone offered us a cigarette. We decided to try it. Why not? We were pretty curious kids. One of my older brothers happened to walk by and see us. He ran home to tell our mother. I was actually glad my mom happened to be home at the time because she wasn't normally. If it were my grandmother, I had no doubt the punishment would have been brutal. You never wanted to piss off Grandma. I didn't have that same kind of fear of Mom because she wasn't home often, so when she was, she loved on us and tried to make up for lost time.

That day, I thought we'd get lucky and not get into as much trouble. I was very wrong.

Mom made us take off our clothes and chased us, beating us with a belt. She eventually took a break when she got tired, leaving us in our room crying. Then she came back for round

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two. This went on and on; an all-day event. *The Whoopin'* (as Dora and I would come to call it, and still do, even to this day) started mid-day. When it finally ended, it was dark outside.

Mom sat us on her lap afterward and told us how much it hurt her to have to do this. That she was doing it to protect us.

Thinking about *The Whoopin'* makes me emotional to this day. There's so much historical trauma in Black families—in *most* families, really—which is why we have to talk about it. There was a lot of frustration in our household, in particular, and we took care of it the way we knew how.

My grandmother was raised in the Deep South, in Alabama, during Jim Crow, when one mistake could mean the end of your life. She was usually the one inflicting corporal punishment in our house. My mom was different, having been raised in Ohio (in the North) and in a different time. For the most part, she dealt with historical trauma and problems by running away from them or simply not dealing with them at all.

Ultimately, she chose to live her life separately from us. She'd send money and provide as best she could, but she was out traveling the world. Whether or not she would have put these words to it, I can see that Mom had specifically gone someplace where she felt unique and elevated, despite the cost to her family. In Europe, her Blackness was celebrated; in the U.S., it was treated like grounds for demotion. Her move followed in the footsteps of many Black people who have left for that same reason, to seek a better experience. That's why, when she was home, it felt like Christmas to us. In that sense, it was rare for her to raise a hand the way Grandma did, but she did it on the day of *The Whoopin'*.



Mom during the Vietnam War performing in the USO alongside Sammy Davis, Jr.

Thanks to Sankofa, I'm able to call to mind both my mom and my grandma's complex histories when I think of moments like these. It's true that every family has its own trauma and its own response to that trauma, but I can only speak to mine. Nothing happened out of the blue in our house; we didn't just get smacked for no reason. It is fair to say, however, that sometimes the discipline was out of proportion, like *The Whoopin'*, though it did what it needed to do. We didn't even *think* about smoking again, but a six-hour whooping was probably more than the situation had called for.

Nobody ever Interrupted that cycle for my grandmother or my mother. And without Interrupting the cycle, it's very likely you'll

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perpetuate it. This cycle I'm talking about stems in particular, not from a lack of love, but from love deeply rooted in feelings of fear, anger, and helplessness. I'm talking about all those things my grandmother had to deal with in the Jim Crow South, all the little messages she gave us over our lives that amounted to some version of, "It's going to be harder for you. Quit snibblin'. You're going to have to work harder. Failure is going to happen because people aren't going to like you. I'm going to toughen you up to protect you. Because I love you, I have to get you ready for the world. That's my job."

We see this manifest today in conversations Black parents have with Black children; it's the same idea, but it looks different: "Don't reach for anything if you get stopped by the police. Hands on the wheel. Comply with their commands. Just do what you need to get home safely."

There are so many lessons like this one. With generations of parents and grandparents who came up equating protection with physical punishment in some way, I see historical trauma on display in *The Whoopin'*. Unless we're intentional about doing things a different way, we all survive how we were taught to survive.

Before I could even arrive at this place of Compassionate Dialogue as a tool for empathy, forgiveness, and self-care, I had to acknowledge all of that historical trauma. I'm still acknowledging it now. It's the spirit of Sankofa in action: looking back to move forward. I may not agree with *The Whoopin'*, but I can say that I understand it now. And that's something.

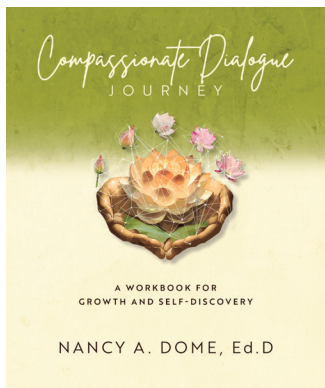
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One of my goals in these decades of pursuing equity work has been to normalize these conversations about *where* we've been, *why* we've been there, and *how* to move forward. I ask myself: How do I break the cycle? How do I ensure that it stops with me? Every day, I think about this question and try to live in a way that is the embodiment of an answer.

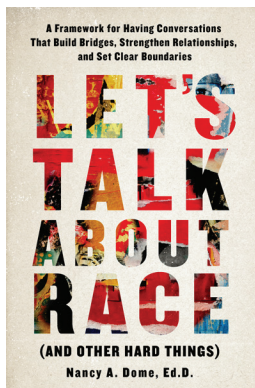
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Continue the Journey

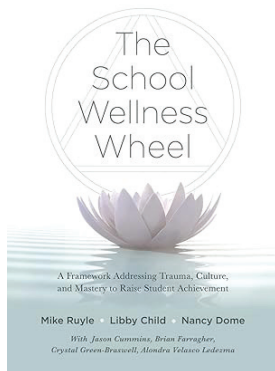
Exploring identity, equity, and connection
through story and practice



A Practice for
Real Conversations



A Framework for
Building Bridges



A Guide to Healthy
Educational Culture