I don’t forgive the man who murdered my cousin DePayne at Mother Emanuel

To insist on a narrative of forgiveness is dehumanizing and violent. It goes against the very nature of lament.

by Waltrina N. Middleton in the July 15, 2020 issue

DePayne Middleton's gravestone. Photo submitted by Waltrina Middleton.

Dear Dep,

I placed hummingbirds on your grave for Mother's Day. It was also your eldest daughter's graduation from graduate school, so I wanted to celebrate her, too. Your daughters chose this symbol to represent the beauty of your voice and the eternal bond and love you share with them. You had the most amazing voice, and we loved to hear you sing. But in the aftermath of your murder at Mother Emanuel five years ago, your voice did not matter. It was stamped out instead by news reports, documentaries, politicians, white supremacist speech, and America's inability to see itself. But we, your family, hear you.

In some cultures, hummingbirds are also known as healers and messengers that connect us with our ancestors. I find comfort in that.

Love,
Wali

When black people were enslaved in America, they found places called brush arbors—safe havens hidden in the woods where they would steal away to pray, encourage one another, enact rites of passage, and plot their freedom. In the sanctuary of the forest, the disinherited and oppressed offered all they had to give in the collective work of loving themselves, their black bodies and the very essence of their humanity.

Where are the sanctuaries for black people in contemporary America? Where can we go to be free, to breathe, to laugh, to love and be loved and be human without the fears and threats of being harmed? For many, the answer has largely been the black church.

But on Wednesday evening, June 17, 2015, in the low country of Charleston, South Carolina, not far from the rich Gullah Sea Islands where I grew up, tragedy struck the black church once again. The very thing I fight and organize against as a minister—our society's deeply masked and far-reaching culture of violence—descended upon my family in the sanctuary of the church.

That night, Dylann Roof sat close to DePayne V. Middleton—a minister, a devoted mother, a brilliant vocalist, and my cousin. Dep, as I called her, was among the nine parishioners the self-proclaimed white supremacist murdered as the group gathered

for Bible study in the historic Emanuel AME Church in downtown Charleston.

Mother Emanuel is steps away from the Old Citadel in one direction and the old port and market in the other, which profited from human cargo. Denmark Vesey, a revolutionary abolitionist, was also a member of Emanuel. In outright rebellion to white supremacy, he mobilized other enslaved people to resist and fight back. Those plans were spoiled, and Vesey and others were killed—and the original church building was burned down by an angry mob.

In 2015, Mother Emanuel's sacred sanctuary was again violated, and innocent lives were again taken. The congregation holds a deep awareness of its heritage, and hospitality and love remain at its core. So on that night, when a stranger entered the people's midst, they offered one of the humblest and most beautiful offerings one can extend to a stranger: a seat at the table.

When he entered the room, they did not attach stereotypes to him. They did not judge him or presume he was a threat because of his race. The stranger was welcomed to join in worship, prayer, and fellowship. He was treated as a guest. My cousin reportedly shared a Bible with him and as a result was one of the first to fall to his murderous act.

When word got out of a shooting at the church, I called Dep's cell phone over and over, even as my gut told me there would not be a response. Even now, I can't get the image out of my head of her ringing phone next to her lifeless body. How I wish I could have been transported through the phone to be by her side. Twelve people gathered there that night. Three survived; nine did not.

It is unimaginable to think that moments before, Dep and all gathered sang Christian hymns with the stranger in their midst and held his hand as they closed the Bible study in a circle of prayer. He betrayed that radical hospitality, murdering some of the most beautiful, remarkable, and kind souls one could be privileged to know. He stole one of my childhood heroes and best friends.

The inconceivable grief her children, parents, and siblings would bear—and still do five years later—would soon be lost in the forced narratives of forgiveness perpetuated by the media, by politicians, and even by the church, which was perhaps mesmerized by the spotlight or pressured to follow the script created for well-behaved black folks who say they love Jesus.

Dep did not get to go home to her four daughters that night. They did not get to have one last dinner with their mommy and confidant. But Roof, who stated that he wanted to start a race war, was taken to Burger King by police officers before he was even taken to jail. My cousin's body was still on the floor of the church—our family was waiting to claim her body as we mourned for her—while Roof, in his white privilege, received the courtesy of a free meal.

Dear Dep,

You did not deserve to be stolen from your babies or your hopes and dreams. You should have been allowed to complete your healing journey and usher in the new moon. You should have been granted the self-discoveries that were on your horizon as a single woman reclaiming her time and voice. You were brilliant, beautiful, and poised with patience and grace, and I deeply miss and love you. I dedicate all of my work for justice to you.

Love,
Wali

They came to worship. They were targeted because of the color of their skin. They were stolen from us because of the demonization of people of color, a problem too often ignored and normalized by a society that accepts traditions and symbols like the Confederate flag, that allows a Klan-endorsed candidate to ascend to the White House.

Had we too soon forgotten about Sunday morning, September 15, 1963, when four girls—Denise McNair, Cynthia Wesley, Carole Robertson, and Addie Mae Collins, age 11 to 14—were killed in the bombing of 16th Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama? Or about the vile acts back in Elmina, Ghana, where chapels were built in the heart of slave castles so that slaves could be christened before being sold and shackled on slave ships? What happened at Mother Emanuel was not new to the legacy or landscape of America.

Imagine being beaten, raped, stolen away from your land, subjected to agonizing suffering—and then having your captors christen you in a chapel inside a slave castle. Five years ago, when domestic terror traumatized a church, culture, and community, the resonance of America's past was exposed like strange fruit. The insistence on a narrative of "the family forgives" created a missed opportunity for a time of deeper truth telling, reconciliation, and healing. How do you promote a

narrative of forgiveness while ignoring the very roots of racism that perpetuated such horror?

We can be committed to love and radical hospitality, to welcoming the stranger into our midst, to extending a seat to join us at the table—while also maintaining our right to be angry and to righteously resist the violence against our humanity. To insist on a narrative of forgiveness is dehumanizing and violent, and it goes against the very nature of lament. As Christians we celebrate the donning of ashes and sackcloth as a priestly act of lamentation and mourning. Why deny families, in a watershed moment of grief, this right to lament?

My family did not offer forgiveness in the courtroom. The words of a few became the headline for all, which became in turn a marketable narrative made for television and for profit, for pulpits and for politics, in order to ease the guilt of white supremacy and remove accountability. In the rush to force this false narrative, our society failed to truly engage dialogue on race, racism, and racialized violence that targets black and brown bodies.

The true story is that the murder of our loved one left us broken, distraught, depressed, and bewildered. Four daughters must now find their way in this world without the physical presence and loving guidance of their mom. With every milestone they achieve—graduating from college on Mother's Day weekend, preparing for sporting events, announcing that they will attend their mom's alma mater—we feel the sting of Dep's absence. Our lament is buried beneath a popularized tale.

This is our truth: a wailing mother stared down the front door each time it opened and called out her daughter's name with disbelief that she was gone. A father with failing eyesight tried to climb onto the roof to repair his home because it was the last project he and his daughter agreed they would take on together. A baby sister, inconsolable without her closest friend, was now tasked with raising her four nieces alongside her own children.

When we are denied our very right to lament, when the narrative forces us into a stage of forgiveness before true reconciliation has taken place, the suggestion is that our lives do not matter, not even to us. To insist that we forgive before we have been granted the dignity to grieve, claim the bodies of our loved ones, and offer proper rituals of last rites is a breach of trust by all who exploited that narrative for

their own gain.

I don’t think even President Obama considered the implications when he sang “Amazing Grace” during his eulogy for Mother Emanuel pastor and state senator Clementa Pinckney—with AME bishops and pastors applauding in the background, too easily obliged to showcase the soft and nonthreatening narratives the media sought. Intentional or not, the image, the song, the occasion, and the powerful impact of the president’s presence pushed the narrative further, moving us farther away from a chance to make this moment about addressing racism instead of about the alleged acquiescence of black folks.

I do not forgive the man who killed my cousin. I do not forgive Nikki Haley, then the governor of South Carolina, who sat in front of the families at the service to remember those killed yet also demonized Black Lives Matter protesters who had the audacity to be outraged by racism and murder. Instead, I choose righteously to lament.

Dear Dep,

There is so much to tell you. So much has happened over the years. You must be proud of the girls. They are your legacy. They each embody your spirit in such unique ways: the bass of your voice, the heartiness of your laughter, your love for sports and music, your nurturing heart, and that old-fashioned personality we often teased you about. They even have your hands—those long piano fingers made for an artist. The greatest miracle of all: you are a grandmother! Can you believe it?

Love,
Wali

Five years ago when those bodies were stolen from us, we had a right and a duty to lament. It was a *kairos* moment that called not for convenience but for the inconvenience of truth telling. We were called to seize that moment in the global spotlight to expose the sins of this land, the city, the state, those who played politics with our loss, and even the church. No governor—and no society, for that matter—should wait until such tragedy strikes before discerning that an epitaph of hate should be removed from state grounds. That flag should have been removed without ceremony or cameras. To say the Confederate flag deserved respect is no different than the officers who said Roof deserved a burger and fries after shedding innocent blood. The rocks cry out, and so do I.

The history of the black church is interwoven in every civil rights and labor movement in this stolen and blood-stained nation. And I can say, as a faith leader and organizer in this 21st-century movement for black lives, that there is a role for the faith community to link arms and refuse to look away—to face the painful reality that we as black bodies in America do not have the privilege or choice to escape. I prayed there would not be another Emanuel, but we were not the last faith community to lament such tragedy. Others followed, and with each new sanctuary that is violated by the shock wave of such violence, my protracted reality of trauma has resurfaced. Where are the safe havens for black and brown bodies in America?

Perhaps that was the question that gave birth to a poet's lament, the song "Strange Fruit." Over the past five years, when I speak on and present my family's story, I sing, "Southern trees bear strange fruit. / Blood on the leaves and blood at the root. / Black bodies swinging in the southern breeze. / Strange fruit hanging from the poplar trees." The imagery is difficult to behold, but the song's haunting sentiments are liberating. The lyrics affirm my sorrows, and with each melody and breath I take when I sing them, I am set free.

The Billie Holiday song was penned by a Jewish man named Abel Meeropol. He wrote the words after he saw photos of a lynching party, white people smiling and posing for the camera. The imagery was so appalling and reprehensible to Meeropol that he was moved to write "Strange Fruit," which was later set to music. Holiday reportedly insisted on closing her sets by having the house lights dimmed as she echoed those haunting lyrics to her audience—perhaps as a benediction, sending them forth with a call to action. That's how I receive them as I channel Billie and Abel and Nina Simone, whose rendition of the song is also liberating for the soul.

Meeropol and Holiday offered their gifts, talents, platforms, and cognizance as tools to inspire change and moral agency. They understood the power of their privilege and location, and they used it. One used a pen and the other a microphone, but the message was clear: there is a collective work and responsibility we must all share in order to inventively dismantle the culture of racism in America and in the world.

Last year, when filmmakers and celebrities produced a film to tell the story of Mother Emanuel, I participated with the hope of sharing my family's point of view. But voices of lament were nearly shut out, and the lengthy interview I gave was reduced to sound bites that could not capture the weight of my heart's lament. While many people celebrated the film, for me it opened wounds and brought me

back to 2015, when the world told black people and the black church that they didn't have a right to be angry. Forgiveness remained the story line, with racism a hidden note.

Dear Dep,

I regret participating in the film. I felt used and exploited by a film marketed to suggest we have healed and moved on without any accountability, anger, or resistance to racialized violence. This film and widespread media coverage seemed to aim to make our tragedy more palatable for white America. Why must I live every single day of my life without my cousin and your daughters without their mother and yet America can't spend some time to intentionally sit with the inconvenience of truth?

Love,
Wali

The black church has endured a painful legacy of suffering in the great Maafa, known as the African Holocaust, which brought us here against our will on slave ships. Yet we remain resilient, steadfast, and unmoved. This does not mean we do not also hurt. We, too, are human. Everything we need to overcome systems of oppression and to ultimately restore our brokenness is within us. But we must be free to tell our own stories, speak our truths, and cry out with our rage and sorrow.

I am not alone in choosing not to forgive. But some family members of those murdered remained silent, not wanting to appear unchristian or to go against the narratives of denominational leadership. I am a Christian. I am a minister. And I do not forgive. My lament does not make me less Christian, and it does not disqualify me as a woman of the cloth. It affirms my humanity; it rejects the moral injuries that plague our society. My lament draws me closer to Christ, who also lamented—and whose ministry is on the side of the oppressed and is the antithesis of racism and of all abuses of power.

God has always been on our side, holding us in the margins, holding our narratives, and holding our spirit in the light even when we struggled to see it. But we must see it—with a hope-filled resolve to proclaim our worth for ourselves right now and for generations to come. We must use the power of our lament, subversively or overtly, to resist and transform not only our own condition but that of others, too. I submit that through our lament we are building a beloved community. We are breaking

chains and creating pathways to freedom for the disinherited. Lamentation is the first step in the necessary work toward justice and reconciliation—if that is what we seek. If we seek only false piety and patriotism, then carry on.

My heart still trembles and aches from the loss of my cousin DePayne—our sweet, beautiful songbird Dep—and the litany of names of ancestors who join a roll call of hashtags. Forgiveness is not a part of my narrative at this time, and I am at peace with this, because it is my right, my lament, my purging, and my process of healing and reconciling. Yet I also see hope for our humanity in the witness of Dep's four remarkable daughters, who will tell their mother's story, honoring her wholeness in body, mind, and spirit—all of her, divine in the image of God.

It is morning now, and tear-filled dewdrops fall fresh upon my face as my eyes look up to God. With a soulful lament, unapologetic resistance, and hopeful proclamation, I say their names lest we forget. Ase: let it be so.

Dear Dep,

We were born cousins; we lived as sisters. The volatile acts of racism stole you from us too soon, but you have left an indelible mark on our lives forever. Perhaps only now as an ancestor, you are privy to the depth of your influence on my life. You taught us how to cast a wide net to love deeply and courageously. Your melodious voice was that of an angel. This truth does not ease the agony of our lament. Still, we listen intently to the heavens and our hearts for your unmatched lyrical wisdom to speak softly, urging us, willing us to go forth in faith and with the power of our narratives and truth.

Love always . . .