



BEAUTY + RESISTANCE

spiritual rhythms for formation and repair

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THE RECKONING

1

For two decades, I accepted that my life would be defined by resistance. My conscious norm was pain, disappointment, and struggle. Nothing felt easy, and the substance of my life obscured the beauty around me. So much so that I stopped looking for beauty altogether.

This perspective is logical, given where I come from. I think of my great-grandfather, who around 1900 asked a White man to buy land for him because the law wouldn't let him purchase it himself. The notion that my great-grandfather could raise a family, make a living, and own land in the heart of southern Virginia—where lynchings were not uncommon, the KKK was active, and Black codes were in place—was audacious.¹ How did my great-grandfather, a grown man, fashion himself into a boy and back again? He had to walk up and ask for that land, perhaps eyes down and hat off in a context that defined him as less than human. He probably planned it for some time, or he was so fluent in White supremacy and well-versed in protecting the comfort of the powerful that he knew how to approach the

situation instinctively. I'm not sure. But he would have had to walk home from that scenario of subservience to be a husband and father in his own household. Lord have mercy.

How often have I felt that in my own life?

I think of my mother, who was born on that land purchased by someone else for her grandfather. She grew up in Brodnax, Virginia, where she was stared at—with *the* stare—as she left segregated East End High School in 1969 to attend integrated Park View High School in 1970.² The “why are you here?” stare. The “you don’t belong here” stare. The stare that dared you to say anything about being followed around the store or the scoreboard not changing when *you people* scored during an integrated basketball game. She was one of the millions of Ruby Bridges who didn’t have a documentary, podcast, or movie made about her but who carried the pain in her bones of that same narrative journey.

I wish the famous stories didn’t resonate as normal. And I understand the efforts to reframe the ability to struggle and overcome as grit, tenacity, and resilience. At the same time, the seeds of violence—enslavement, Jim Crow, police brutality, redlining, patriarchy—that made my mom’s life so hard never needed to be planted in the first place.

I know the de-formation and re-formation process. I was de-formed by society to fit into socially acceptable boxes for years and re-formed elsewhere if those around me were conscious of the tools necessary for freedom and growth;

often, though, it was just another box to ensure my safety and survival.

That’s what “the talk” is all about. Black folks need to know the boxes that are safe to be in when interacting with law enforcement.

Millions of White Americans have learned about the discussion Black American parents and other parents of color give our children about how to respond to the police. In the wake of the murders of Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, and George Floyd, a conversation that normally happens on the margins suddenly became a mainstream subject on news outlets across the political, social, and economic spectrum.

Ahmaud Arbery was killed in Brunswick, Georgia, by a group of White men who believed him to be a burglar when he was out for an afternoon jog on February 23, 2020. Shortly after this, Breonna Taylor was shot while sleeping in her bed on March 13, 2020, in Louisville, Kentucky, during the execution of a “no-knock warrant.” This controversial practice allows officers to go into a residence without announcing themselves or giving any advance notice. She was shot six times. Later, on May 25, 2020, George Floyd was killed in Minneapolis after an officer kneeled on his neck for nearly ten minutes while a crowd watched in horror.

These are the stories most people know about. But *The Guardian* reports that in the United States, police killed 1,152 people in 2020.³ That is more than three people per day.

Suddenly the conversations I and many others have with our children in private were streaming on social media, discussed by pundits on Fox News and CNN, and published in books that pushed people deeper into their rabbit holes and echo chambers.

I thought this was all the stuff of life. Life was marked by pain, painted by struggle, and defined by resistance. To live was to push emotions down, hold tears back, and harden our hearts in order to brave a society that doesn't want us to be part of it—though it does want our labor. I didn't know how to talk to my kids about the richness of our heritage and ethnic identity. I couldn't describe the beauty of our history, which can feel miraculous given the sheer level of disadvantage and violence that Black, Indigenous, and other people of color have faced over the last five hundred years, along with the trauma that entails. I knew the gospel but I needed the liberated wisdom of the good news.

THE CROSS WITH NO RESURRECTION

When I decided to follow Jesus, this didn't change much. In the context of my college fellowship, I internalized the idea that to be faithful was to be crucified, knowing resurrection was coming but not soon or in full. I had to be strong, wait on the Lord, and take up my cross. To be a Christian was to resist the evil in the world and the evil in myself. Looking back, I realize that my life did not lack beauty—I just couldn't see it.

So I embraced the resistance. Or at least a version of it. I worked for money, for justice, and sometimes for both, but I always stayed busy. For far too long, if I caught a glimpse of beauty, I refused to embrace it because I didn't have a historical, theological, or emotional category for it. Delight was temporary and therefore unproductive, so it was not worth my time. I tried to keep an even keel, never growing too excited, angry, or sad, and so my spectrum of emotions narrowed. I built a résumé on my own efforts and righteousness that I asked Jesus to bless and people to like. And since people liked me, I thought Jesus blessed it. My wife and others sounded alarms, but I was unable to respond meaningfully to their invitations to be different or warnings to get off the path.

When I started therapy in 2013, I was warned to not burn out, to be present to those around me, and to truly allow my feelings to rise up and be made known. It was a struggle. I distinctly remember in group therapy being asked questions and responding with canned Sunday school answers. They almost laughed me out of the room. These men and women had seen the good Christian guy before and were not interested in a sermon or Bible study. They wanted to get to know me. And not just what I was passionate about, but me as a person. And I didn't know where to start.

I remember multiple times sitting down with the family of my wife, Priscilla, when we first started dating. They, too, wanted to get to know me. They didn't want to hear

where I went to college, what books I had written, or where I worked. They wanted to know about my family, what it was like to grow up in Brodnax, and what my hopes and dreams were for the future—independent of my ambitions.

In my head I thought, why would I do that? If I shared my feelings and didn't get the reaction I wanted, I could be hurt again. I could talk about the gospel songs that held our house together and the Motown ones that blew it apart. And then I'd have to explain what gospel music is and who the Temptations are. What would be the point? I had no interest in discussing the moments in my childhood when I longed for connection and was often met with confusion, silence, disgust, or rejection. I could not bear the weight of that disappointment.

Eventually I came to realize that the point was connection, relationship, and love. I could feel disappointed and share how, why, and make requests. I could not love someone I was trying to control or manipulate, and I could receive love even amid conflict. I was just plain lovable, and so was everyone around me. We are all worthy of being known. This was a slippery truth—one I am still trying to hold on to.

While I was trying to do the deep work of healing, the breadth of God's love seemed to expand. My growing awareness of and resistance to police violence intensified this reality for me. Moreover, the ramp-up to the 2020 election season was tumultuous, the Covid-19 pandemic

was debilitating, and hate crimes against Asian Americans were widespread. Donald Trump was unapologetically racist and sexist, and his first presidential term was chaotic, cruel, and endorsed by many who claimed to follow Jesus around me.

Adam Serwer's 2018 essay in *The Atlantic*, "The Cruelty Is the Point," makes a clear and compelling argument. Serwer identifies the disturbing reality communities of color, women, the poor, Muslims, the disabled, immigrants, and LGBTQIA+ people found themselves in during Trump's election campaigns and presidency. Trump filled hours of media time with speeches that mocked, condemned, and threatened vulnerable communities, explaining who you "should" hate and why.⁴

For example, Serwer points out the courageous testimony of Christine Blasey-Ford, who came forward with her story of past sexual assault perpetrated by then-Supreme Court nominee Brett Kavanaugh. Before a panel of United States senators, she recounted her experience with steadfast clarity. When questioned by Democratic Senator Patrick Leahy, who asked her to recount her assault, she described the "uproarious laughter" of her attackers as they fumbled with her clothing. She named this disturbing detail of her ordeal, and then Trump amplified it days later. At a rally he ridiculed her before thousands of people, who laughed alongside him.⁵

Serwer notes, “The president’s mocking of her testimony renders all sexual-assault survivors collateral damage. Anyone afraid of coming forward, afraid that she would not be believed, can now look to the president to see her fears realized.”

This effect stretched across marginalized groups when Trump encouraged police abuse as they laughed in the background and made fun of *New York Times* reporter Serg Kovalsky, who has a congenital joint condition that causes his arms to remain in a bent position.⁶ Perhaps most devastating was when Trump called SARS-CoV-2 “the China virus,” which precipitated a terrible rise in violence against the Asian diaspora here in the United States.⁷ Trump separated families at the border, revoked protections for undocumented immigrants brought to the United States as children, and attacked NFL players for protesting.⁸

These were perilous, destabilizing times. They still are.

But during the heights of unrest, I was not posting on social media or organizing prayer meetings and protests. I was not mobilizing leaders, pressing for reforms, or leveraging my platform to turn more attention to these tragedies. I was a Black man holding my newborn Black Chinese Korean American daughter in the wake of Ahmaud Arbery’s slaying, unprepared for the Atlanta spa shooting that happened less than a year later, and washing packages to protect us from the pandemic.⁹ I was on sabbatical from what I thought my purpose was. Then, I went on paternity

leave and remained off social media and organizing for twelve months.

Why? Because I'd completely burned out.

Before the advent of Covid-19 and the birth of my second daughter, I checked my phone compulsively. I felt compelled to respond to every comment and monitor likes, shares, and follows because I conflated engagement online with God's favor and success. Meanwhile, my life was on fire. Prior to my sabbatical and the birth of my daughter, I burned the candle at both ends and in the middle in pursuit of a false identity I chased relentlessly with every waking hour. I sat for hours in Grand Central Station writing, often until the wee hours of the morning. Historically, I wrote poetry, but after Michael Brown was killed in Ferguson, Missouri, in 2014, I chose prose.

IN DESPERATE NEED OF A NEW STORY

For five years, the story I'd told myself was that if I just wrote the right words, perhaps Christians worshipping Trump would come to their senses. If I just had the right caption on a photo on Instagram or wrote the right thing for HuffPost, light would crack through the fog and people would see the counterfeit kingdom of God that America is. I poured my heart out in essays and spent my voice on speaking. I wrote, read, and reshared articles, and watched documentaries using the free Wi-Fi in Vanderbilt Hall, trying to think through what resources and experiences

might lead students from Cooper Union to take jobs that created life instead of going to work for weapons manufacturers. Could I write the essay that made Black Lives Matter to police and end the constant stream of brutality? I could and I would, I thought.

In hindsight, it's easy to see what I was doing. Part of my efforts fed a hunger for external validation that hadn't appeared out of nowhere. It was created inside me before kindergarten, tied to a void, an absence of affirmation that my father never filled and an anti-Black society exacerbated within me. I followed my momma's prompting to "not be like my dad" and took White society's invitation to be a good one. When I heard "be a good one," it was a warning, insult, and invitation. A warning because to not be a good one could mean lynching or the loss of a job opportunity, scholarship, home loan, favor, or some other leg up on the ladder of racial hierarchy. It was an insult because it lands like a socially acceptable way to say *good n******. And an invitation because if I did perform what was asked of me, then my life could be materially and experientially easier.

I heard the warning, felt the insult, and took the invitation. I set out to fashion myself into a model of the men I saw on the ABC Friday night lineup through academic and then economic success. I would live out all of the prayers and prophecies prayed over me every time a church mother realized I shared a birthday with Martin Luther King Jr.—January 15.

And then one day during marriage counseling, Priscilla looked up at me and said, “I’m just not going to try any more. I’ve been chasing you for too long.” This was not our first session and it wouldn’t be our last, but her words hung in the air like heavy fog in that second-floor office. The counselor didn’t speak, and I didn’t know what to say. I had created an environment where she was the gatekeeper. We were not collaborators. In my mind, we were opposing forces.

I would say things like, “Is it okay if I go and speak at this event?” or “Can I write an article for them?” I set her up as the villain and therefore the one to blame. If I did not want to be my dad, it was clear that she did not want to be my mom saying yes or no to a manchild who was unwilling to set and hold his own boundaries, determine priorities, or make plans.

I heard her desperation and felt her invisibility. She made my choice clear: I could live as though I were single, pursuing fame, adoration, and impact. Or I could choose to be significant to the ones with whom I shared the intimacies of life and build a life with them.

I chose the latter.

These and other conversations prompted me to make changes. During my sabbatical and paternity leave in 2019 and 2020, I began seeing two spiritual directors a month and a therapist every week, and I participated in group therapy every Monday night. One evening I was sitting in a room with a candle when one of my spiritual directors,

Kimberly, prompted me to go to a place I had never been by asking a question I had never heard: “Jonathan, if God was your only audience, would that be enough?”

The Sunday school answer is yes, but if I’d said that I would have been lying. So I told her the honest truth: “No.” When I admitted that, something split inside me and my head began to ache like never before. Yes, there was much good fruit from all the work I was doing. God was gracious and faithful. But no amount of effective activism and social validation could replace what God offered me simply for being his kid, made in his image to flourish, work, steward, and create. No amount of activity and affirmation could bear the weight of my identity. He alone is and should be my all in all. That truth broke into me at that moment, but I wasn’t able to grasp that reality until I took the time to hold my own children closer than my vice of goodness.

FROZEN II AND HOMEMADE PIZZA

I had no idea that faithfulness meant being present to cooing, laughing, and fort building while explaining to my eldest daughter the depiction of reparations, decolonization, and ethnic reconciliation in Disney’s *Frozen II* over homemade pizza on our weekly movie nights. I didn’t see activism or the destruction of oppressive narratives in my household as valuable as it was in the streets, behind podiums, or from the pulpit. But now I know talks across cups of hot chocolate in our kitchen can be as challenging,

formative, and fruitful as those in the four walls of a church or backstage at a conference.

I learned from taking care of my daughters that we could sing “Let It Go” from Disney’s *Frozen* at the top of our lungs and lament the deaths of parents while thinking about what it means to be young women in a world where patriarchy reigns. We could celebrate the joy of siblings, friendship, and imagination while contemplating loss, grief, change, and loneliness, because being different is hard. “Do You Want to Build a Snowman?” and Olaf’s coming to be were all the things I didn’t know I needed and everything I wanted and wished for with my two daughters.

I don’t want to spoil this for you because I believe you must watch *Frozen II*, but you must know that Elsa and Anna come from a multiethnic heritage. Their father is royalty from Arendelle and their mother is Northuldra, an indigenous tribe being colonized and exploited by the citizens of Arendelle. Elsa hears voices calling her to a mysterious forest, and when she makes her way in with her magic, Anna and her faithful friends follow. Shortly after some crucial explaining by Olaf, which includes stellar voiceover skills by award-winning actor Josh Gad, Elsa and Anna are sung into their new family. My eyes fill with tears every time. There is so much beauty.

Later in the film (spoiler alert!), when the lies of the colonial power are unearthed, Anna proclaims in an act of liberative reparation that they must destroy the dam used

to starve the People of the Sun. The lie is a curse keeping the two worlds separate. Once it is exposed, the dam destroyed, and the water allowed to flow, the people are reconciled. Those in power thought their lives would be destroyed if the dam were to fall, but instead there is flourishing for all people. Beauty is the fruit of their resistance. And resistance is the result of their encounter with beauty. *Lord, have mercy.*

I cry every time Elsa's hands are taken by her ancestors and they begin to sing. I didn't pray with my mom at home until I was twenty years old, but in my little church, the songs bound us together. I sing to, for, and—now that they're older—with my girls every day. I want our songs to be on their hearts. I also pray with them original liturgies I wrote for them before they go to sleep or leave our home. Every night we say:

I am accepted.

God is not ashamed of me.

I am his and he is mine.

I am a child of the Most High God.

What I didn't realize when I wrote that prayer was that it was my own core longing. When our family says it together, there is profound beauty and resistance with each sentence. It is a reminder that the darkness is comprehensive but the light is not overcome. Growing up, I lived out of the belief that love and acceptance were just out of reach and required

enormous effort. My daughters will never think that, and I see how free they are because they don't.



To be a Christian is to be crucified.

Yes, and: to be a Christian is to share in the resurrection. To be a Christian is to lay down your life and it is to receive God's Spirit and his kingdom. That's what my life was missing. I knew injustice and resistance, but I didn't know abundant life and beauty. I saw myself as a hammer in God's toolbox and a soldier in his army, not as his kid with a permanent seat at my Father's table. I threw myself into work, performing for acceptance, rather than being and receiving. I didn't see how light was breaking through every day in smiles, laughs, wonderful food, and good music from when I was younger through to today. I was too de-formed and deceived to notice.

So I allowed God to start re-forming me.

I needed an often-forgotten part of discipleship: God's clear and wonderful invitation to beauty and resistance in equal and ever-increasing measure, personally and corporately for our benefit and God's glory. This would also be the case if the opposite were true.

If my life had been saturated with beauty, and resistance were merely an afterthought, I would still need a healthy awareness of both. If I expected comfort instead of struggle, my daily life would inevitably be pierced by the suffering,

distress, destruction, and upheaval of others—whether in my Instagram feed, through family members sharing links in the group chat, or during holiday conversations that would leave me anxious or concerned. Unhoused neighbors in need or peaceful protesters would disrupt my morning commute and I might want to make a change but feel unsure about where to begin.

Once I started to engage, issues like poverty, White supremacy, patriarchy, genocide, healthcare, and immigration would seem overwhelming. I'd tell myself that managing daily responsibilities was hard enough. So I'd likely end up turning up the volume on the headphones of my life, focus on more self-care, and try to filter out the sounds of war, mass shootings, and political turmoil—until it all became too loud to ignore again. Eventually, I'd feel that familiar sense of being overwhelmed, and the cycle of disruption, disengagement, outrage, and burnout would start all over.

God made us for more than this.

Wherever we find ourselves on the spectrum between resistance and beauty, whether through our history or preference, I am convinced a healthy life with Jesus holds an awareness of and engagement with both—usually at the same time. I am convinced we can build the scaffolding for a new life with Christ in pursuit of his beloved community together.

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