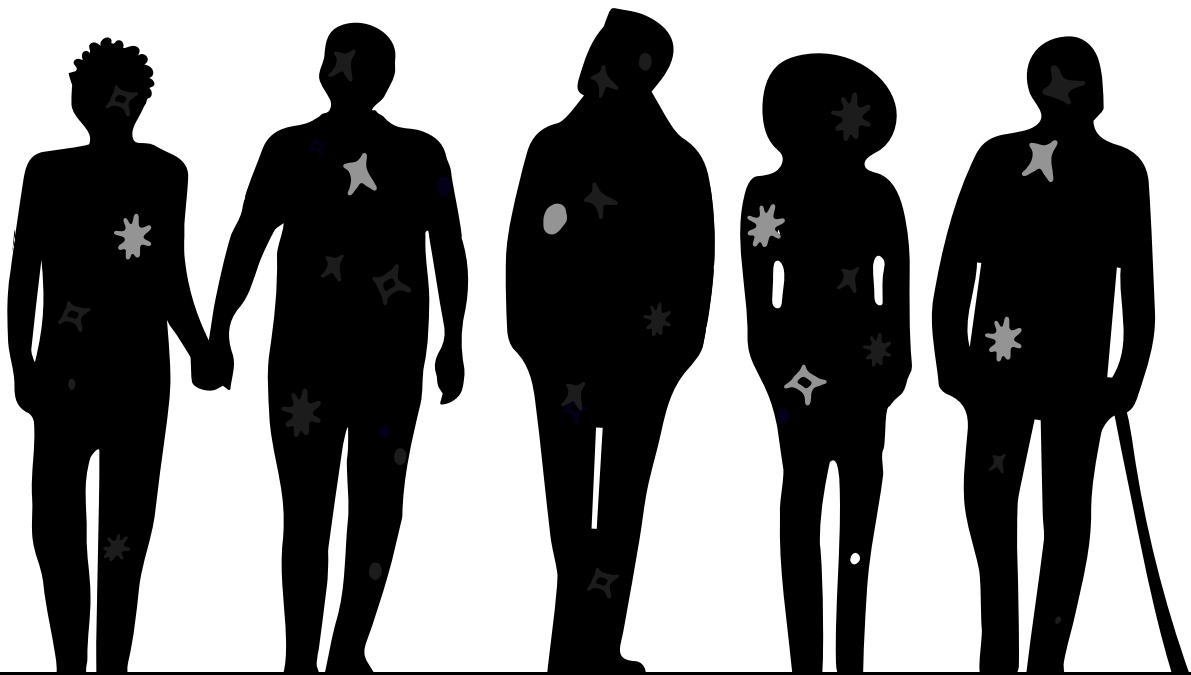


THE COSMIC WE

Episode 3: Wounds

with Dr. Barbara Holmes and Dr. Donald Bryant



from the CENTER FOR ACTION AND CONTEMPLATION

Barbara Holmes: Gilad Hirschberger wrote in her study on collective trauma and the social construction of meaning, that collective trauma is a cataclysmic event that shatters the basic fabric of society. Aside from the horrific loss of life, the collective trauma is also a crisis of meaning. Collective trauma is defined as a crisis shared by a group of people of any size, up to and including an entire society.

Traumatic events witnessed by an entire society can stir up collective resentment, often resulting in a shift in that society's identity. When we talk about collective wounds today, we no longer refer to a single or sequential, catastrophic or geographic event that wound a community, like slavery or genocide. To be wounded, we don't have to be located in the same place at the same time.

We can view crises on social media or television at different times and locations, and people of different ethnicities can still experience the collective trauma and wounding of people trapped in racist systems. The wounds of racism manifest in the individual but are not personal. They're inflicted because of the mythologies of race and the structural violence of racism. Ultimately, suffering of the magnitude that I'm describing, can't be resolved by individuals.

It is happening right before our eyes, yet the response of American citizens has been muted by the argument that what they're seeing and hearing is not oppression at all. It's compliance with laws, but those laws just happen to be rife with ethnocentrism, rejection of the stranger, racism and structural oppression of the poor. In this present day of heightened xenophobia, fear and national isolationism, entire communities are suffering from current and historical trauma.

Donny Bryant: From the Center for Action and Contemplation, I'm Donny Bryant.

Barbara Holmes: I'm Barbara Holmes.

Donny Bryant: This is The Cosmic We. It's great to be here today to engage in this beautiful conversation reflecting on the third chapter of your book, Crisis Contemplation. This chapter, for our listening audience, is entitled Wounds. This chapter is actually maybe one of your shorter chapters, but probably one of the more powerful chapters. I would like to just start this conversation out by framing this idea of wounds.

Another word that, I think, will be great to use as a synonym is just trauma. We can call it trauma, we can call it brokenness, pain, but wounds. I was listening to, I think, it was a commercial the other day of an episode from Ancestry that was sponsored by ancestry.com, but it's really on Discovering Your Roots, hosted by Dr. Henry Louis Gates.

For those of you who don't know, Dr. Henry Louis Gates, he with his team, typically goes through the ancestral DNA research for a lot of celebrities, famous people. He presents the findings to them, and it's often eyeopening. In this particular episode, was an individual by the name of Jordan Peele, who is a screenwriter, a producer, an actor, a comic. He's done movies like Nope, Us, Get Out, and the sketch comedy show, Key & Peele.

In this episode, Dr. B, he actually was being presented this information about his great-grandmother. As Dr. Gates was sharing that information about his great-grandmother, who from the 1860 census, information was gathered from that, that revealed that his great-grandmother was taken from her family, split from her brother, and her parents, sold for \$1,250, and she was 12 years old. Her brother, who was younger, was sold for \$700.

As he sat there and processed, meaning Jordan, as he processed this information, Dr. B, Dr. Gates asked, "What do you think your grandmother was experiencing? What do you think she was going through? Well, how does this affect the family?" Jordan made this eyeopening, he made a statement that just blew me away. He said, "This had to be traumatizing. This had to be difficult." But then he said, Dr. B, "Where does that trauma go? That type of trauma has to go somewhere." This is how I want to frame this conversation.

Barbara Holmes: Wow.

Donny Bryant: This is how I want to frame this conversation. Where does trauma like that go?

Barbara Holmes: That's a great opening for the meditation I wrote for the beginning of the chapter that goes like this. Wounds inflicted upon the village pierce the self and soul of us, shatter the eye and the we of us. We've seen it before so many times, and yet we're surprised and unwilling to look into the vacant gaze of systems that decapitate, mutilate and incarcerate. We can stop them. It won't be easy, but it can be done.

All we have to do is to redirect our resources and repent for the harm the systems have done on our behalf. We can testify and record with our phones a sacred and necessary witness. We can go get the monsters that we have unleashed. Where does the trauma go? It has to go somewhere. I don't know. Over the years, because my family has a history of similar trauma, we just thought that it dissipated into the air or something.

We always had this get over it, keep going. You don't have time to pause. You have to survive. You got to eat, you got to go to work. You don't have time to deal with trauma. But as we talk about in the chapter, trauma changes everything about us. When you're talking about this on a communal level, there's a whole bunch of communities, lots of communities, walking around with trauma.

You're dealing as a system or a government or police with folks who look all right, their behavior may be a little off, but they are operating out of trauma. How does that happen? Does the trauma stick to your skin? What happens? Is it part of your memory system? Well, we now know that it's genetic. I think it's Dr. Rachel Yehuda says, "You're not born with a genetic prison." What she means by that is the genes you've got, they're not locked in forever.

It's not always going to be that way. Your genes are affected by what you experience. Your genes are affected by trauma, and that trauma is passed down through the generations to folks who never directly experienced the trauma. Where does a trauma go? It goes into our children, it goes into our progeny, it goes into our communities. The community suffers and the trauma is alive and well.

Donny Bryant: These wounds, as you're telling us, these wounds have a historical relationship, but as you write, they're also intergenerational. They're handed down. There is an inheritance, inheritance, if you will. They're epigenetic, if you will. There's this deep resonance there, but it's often not recognized. I think this is the challenge. What Jordan said, "Where do they go?" And what you're saying, they're within us.

It's there, the manifestation, the realization, the evidence of the pain, the trauma, it's there. It's oftentimes reflected in how we raise our children. It's often reflected in our ideologies or how we interpret the world around us. What you're saying though, but things can change. This story is not fixed. This is not a fixed story. Transformation is possible, change is possible and I think that's an important fact.

Could you elaborate a little bit more on that, because I think that's critical? When we talk about trauma, sometimes we think, "It is what it is, we just got to deal with it. Nothing can change," but you're saying no.

Barbara Holmes: Yeah, but everything can change, but first you have to recognize the fact that you have been traumatized. The fact that a whole group of folk from different nations on the continent of Africa didn't know where they came from, whose languages, songs, mythologies, were purposely taken away. You would think, "Okay, now that's a loss that's traumatizing, that will be with you forever."

Then we come to the year 2023, where we can actually figure out who we are and where we're from. But even finding out who you are, who your ancestors are, can be traumatizing. My sisters took a trip to Ghana in 2019, the year of the returns. They were led by a group of African Americans from all over the country. The leader had her DNA done that was going to be revealed in Ghana at the place of no returns, at the Door of No Returns.

She was completely traumatized when she got the results because she had no African heritage at all. She was shocked, she was traumatized, she burst into tears. No one knew what to say or do. It's a double-edged sword to know who you are, is to absorb some realities that you never knew or you've forgotten, or you don't want to know. I was looking at a segment of the show you were talking about with Angela Davis.

Some of you remember the civil rights activist and professor, who has been fighting for the rights of the oppressed and the underemployed for years. She found out with Dr. Henry Louis Gates, that she had ancestors on the Mayflower. She found out that she had a strong American lineage of the revolutionary type. She said, "It is amazing." Because as an activist, she's been called non-American, anti-American and all of that.

Here she is, embodying the original settlers and history from the revolutionary times. She said, "I always said there's nothing more American than to fight for the rights of others, like those that did in the revolutionary times." Now, she

finds out that her ancestors were part of that.

Donny Bryant:

You make a really clear distinction in the book between individual wounds and communal wounds. For our listening audience, this chapter is primarily around the idea of the shared experience of wounds that affect villages, affect tribes, affect families, affect communities, crisis or trauma that is inflicted on a group. Just the other day, Dr. B, I was privileged to see a play entitled Detroit '67.

Detroit '67, which was highlighting the events that took place in 1967 in Detroit. As I was growing up, I was born in '75, and my understanding and the history that I was told, these were entitled or called the race riots of 1967. However, as I began to learn and listen and watch this play, there was another narrative that came out. There was a wound from that experience that was inflicted upon the community of Detroit.

Matter of fact, it seemed like it was since 1967, the narrative or the impression, or how people saw outsiders and how they saw Detroit change dramatically. Detroit before that, had a much more positive image, but the image after '67 really went down, but the narrative was these were race riots. However, there was an alternative narrative that was revealed from listening and watching and even reflecting on histories.

That there was an alternative narrative and that narrative, that it was not a race riot. The conflict was not necessarily between races, but the conflict was between Black people and the police at that time. There were some bad actors from the way history presents it within the police department that was inflicting pain, trauma, wounds on the community.

That blew up and the governor invited the National Guard to come in. Of course, President Johnson at the time, he brought in the army. You had a lot of military force that actually inflicted pain and trauma in the community. As I begin to think back because I'm from Detroit, I was born in Detroit, and as I think about the communal connections and the identity of the community here.

I could not help but to go back and evaluate and assess the trauma that was inflicted during that period, and how that trauma has been handed down, and how that trauma is still being realized today.

Barbara Holmes:

It seems odd to say that a city can suffer trauma, but it can. That's the work of Walter Wink, who says these things have spiritual interiorities. There's angels over the institutions, angels over the city, that embody the essence of the spiritual core of that institution or that city. Yes, a city can be traumatized. I lived in Memphis for many years, and Memphis never got over the assassination of Martin Luther King on its streets, just never got over it.

You could feel it years, years later after the assassination. I remember Mrs. King coming in for a trial that was happening in Memphis with regard to the assassination many years later. She wept all through the airport as if it had

happened that day. The city essentially shut down in that area, and many of the white citizens moved further out and abandoned the cities. Memphis has spent years feeling guilty, if a city can feel guilty.

I remember the mayor apologizing again and again for all that had happened. How does a city recover when something happens, like Dallas, where President Kennedy's shot? Then there's this sense in the city, of a spiritual malaise that falls upon the citizens and falls upon that city. It has economic impact, it has impact everywhere when you have that kind of scarring, that kind of wounding that we're talking about.

But I think what happens nowadays is you don't have to be in the place of the wounding to be wounded. Because we can Zoom and because of television and 24-hour news cycles, we can get wounded just looking at television. I make it a real spiritual practice to be careful of what I watch because of the constant wounding. I can't sit and eat dinner and watch the war in Ukraine. I can't watch George Floyd be killed, and then be okay and go garden or shop.

The wounding is happening on a different level now, and it's affecting more than the group that the wound is inflicted upon. Because it wasn't just African Americans who were wounded by seeing George Floyd killed, anyone who saw that was wounded. Then the question becomes, "Okay, we're being wounded at every turn. How do we heal? How do we recover from this?" There are some very, very real possibilities that I explore in the chapter.

Donny Bryant:

Yeah. I would like to get into some of those practices, but I want to just elaborate a little bit more on that point you brought up about just how what we watch and what we allow into our hearts and to our minds could affect us. Dr. B, there are movies that I have walked out on, just because what I was witnessing, the trauma, the wounding, if you will, I didn't want to take that in.

There are certain things that I choose to not allow myself to participate in, as a result of just protecting and guarding my heart. But let's get into some of the more, what are some practices? What are some things that we can do? Even, Dr. B, and I want to ask you, what's the role of compassion? How do we, as not only those who are trying to heal from some of the historical and generational wounds and trauma, so what are some practices?

But also as an outsider, a second question, Dr. B. As an outsider, as someone who may not have been someone who has been on the receiver of the historical trauma, the generational trauma, but maybe as an outsider, what is the role of compassion? How can we participate in the healing of the other?

Barbara Holmes:

Well, I think the first thing I want to say is that I always considered these events to be ultimate. It was really helpful to me to learn under the teachings of Father Richard Rohr, that there were cyclical wisdom patterns and cyclical healing patterns of order, disorder and reorder. The reason we know that transformation can come, is because there is a reordering and there is change that comes after chaos always. The first thing is to face the chaos.

Taking wisdom from Native American studies, they've had many, many what we call historical wounds. What they found during the historical wounding, was that it was not helpful, talk therapy didn't help. Not at all, because it didn't reach the places where the wounding had taken place. When you're wounded like that, there is internal devaluation. There's an assault on yourself and the community. You become voiceless and you become enraged in ways that you cannot express in healthy ways.

The whole point is to be able to allow your body as well as your soul to heal from the wounds, because it's not just your psyche that is wounded, but also your body. Even though you look perfectly all right, internally you have been wounded. They found that ritual helped. Dancing helped, song and drumming helped. If you've ever been to powwow as a spectator, and when I lived in Minneapolis, I had the opportunity to do that.

There is something just electric about drumming circles and the singing and the methodical rhythm, like a heartbeat, of folks in a circle, all drumming at the same time. 15, 20 people drumming a huge drum and singing, and almost wailing as they drum. Something happens that helps to heal the places that talk can't reach. Psychological stuff is great, and psychiatry is necessary. Talk therapy is one of the most wonderful instruments we have for healing, but it isn't for everyone.

It isn't the best therapy for all kinds of wounding. What they found, the woman who's doing this work, her name is Braveheart. What she says is that basically you have to move around and allow your body to release the pain that is locked into its sinew and into its bones. I can see that also in my own context, African American context, where in African society, often there are great demarcations between movement from childhood to adolescence, to adulthood, but they do that through ritual.

We no longer have rituals that allow people to feel as if they are moving toward a different reality. Native Americans heal from the trauma that is historical and current, through ritual, through dance, through song, through powwow, through sweat lodge, releasing from the body, the pain. African Americans and others subjected to trauma, Asian Americans, immigrants at the Mexican border, there's got to be a way to figure out how to have practices that allow the body to release the trauma. That's more than talk, and that's more than sitting quietly.

Donny Bryant: Song, dancing, art, painting.

Barbara Holmes: Yes.

Donny Bryant: Things that engage both the heart, but also the body. The participation in these rituals can become a pathway in the process of healing.

Barbara Holmes: That's right. I said in the beginning of this little talk when I was reading the meditation, that we can do something about the wounding. I wonder what you think about that, because what exactly can we do, other than turning off our televisions and not participating in the viewing of the trauma that's being set upon us on a daily basis? What can we do to redirect our resources?

How do we repent for the monsters we've unleashed in our representatives, who are not doing what we sent them to do? How do we change the language that harms because it's not just physical? I was looking at something the other day, and they were talking about how the word woke is now being used as an epithet, as a curse word, describing companies as having gone woke.

Donny Bryant: Yeah. Yeah, it's negative now.

Barbara Holmes: Yeah, negative. I remember writing this meditation because I live in Florida, and Governor Santos has been particularly hard on woke. He seems to think that the word woke began with Black Lives Matter.

Donny Bryant: No.

Barbara Holmes: Yes, Black Lives Matter did use the term woke, but it really began with Jesus and Matthew, when Jesus says, "Go up to the rooftop, stay awake, be alert, stay woke."

Donny Bryant: Yeah. It has been part of the spiritual rhetoric for generations. Spiritual awakening, it means to become alive, to have insight, to know. You're 100% right. I think there is something that we can do, and it may be more about just becoming more compassionate. For example, I began to even realize as I engage with individuals, as I counsel individuals, Dr. B, or as I engage with people who have been through their own personal but also collective trauma.

That just listening, just being compassionate, not judging a person's present behavior as this is the whole of them, this is all of them. But recognizing that a person may be mirroring a level of deep trauma that they do not currently recognize. That the opportunity, the invitation for me is to participate in this individual's healing by not judging them, by loving them compassionately. By loving them maybe unconditionally, by being present.

By listening as they work through this, as they are coming to an awareness maybe on their own of what's happening. I may not have to have the answer, but they can experience a reflection of divine love from me, that may enable them or participate or even just be a part of the equation, as they get closer to finding out who they really are. I think compassion, Dr. B, is critical. I can just think of my own personal journey. How many times have we been misunderstood?

How many times have we been working through something trying to process something, trying to evaluate and understand, why do I feel this way? Why does this trigger me? Why am I angry right now? Why does this bother me? That takes time, that's a journey. You're right, talk therapy is not enough. You can see 10, 12, 15, 20 therapists and still not find a solution to what's going on on the inside.

There's no real blueprint, other than you referenced Dr. Rohr, other than to me, understanding the universal Christ in all of us, the divine image. I think being woke to that, having an awakening to that, seeing that. Seeing the good in you, which is an act of compassion, is a very simple step. It may not be easy, but it's a very simple step. It doesn't take a degree, it doesn't take a lot of finances, resources. It just takes a choice.

It is a decision to love, a decision to love.

Barbara Holmes: I took training in counseling, but I was always put off by the ways in which counseling seemed to have a format that required compassionate distance, is what I call it, with the language of I hear you saying and repeating back what people have said. Honoring what they're saying, but not giving in-depth conversation that's engaged. As a person of color, that isn't how we worked together in the communities I grew up in. People listened and they sat with you, and they held your hand, but they also, they engaged.

They'd say, "Well, you know what? When that happened to me, this is what happened. Or my auntie fell off a ledge. When she did that, something happened." There was always this folk tale telling of stories, and usually the story was worse than the one you had just offered. You tended to feel a little bit better because you went, "Well, it's not as bad as what I just heard, what she just shared." But there was a way in which the community offered a compassion that was, it had legs, I call it. It was standing there with you.

It was saying, "Yeah. Honey, I understand. Guess what? I've been there. I've walked that path. I've been where you are and didn't know what to do. I don't know what you're going to do, and I'm not going to tell you what to do, but I hear you and I've gone that way also." There are so many ways of offering compassion, just like there are so many different ways of worshiping. I think some of the reasons that I so enjoyed the Pentecostal experience, was because it was a way of purging trauma.

You would live for the week on Sunday, where you would see someone screaming, run down that aisle, dancing wildly to the music or not to the music, but there was this emotional outlet that as a UCC congregationalist, I had not seen before. I had not experienced before. There was such a sense of relief when you left church, didn't last too long.

Donny Bryant: Sure, right.

Barbara Holmes: It lasted about as long as you could remember the sermon, which also wasn't very long. But when you left that place, you felt like you had been purged. The sum of the wounds, if they weren't healed, at least you'd cleaned some of them out and they were ready for healing.

I am a proponent of being able to let the emotion go somewhere, and not for us to pretend and allow scabs to heal over festering wounds.

Donny Bryant: Yeah. Wow. Wow, that's deep. I can see that. How many times have we experienced something and maybe it was an unexpected crisis, and out of the blue you just yelled, you just screamed, right?

Barbara Holmes: Got to let it out.

Donny Bryant: You just have to let it out. It's like what Jordan Peele said, it has to go somewhere, and if it doesn't, where does it reside? It's within you, and then it's handed down, it's mirrored. It's interesting, there are times where I'll have a conversation with my

children where I say, “Hey, I want to apologize for X, Y, Z.” It’s because I’m beginning, as you indicated earlier, you have to first recognize that there’s traumas there.

You have to first recognize that there’s an original wound, that there’s an original brokenness. I think in one of Dr. Rohr’s pieces, he makes a juxtaposition between original sin. St. Augustine’s classic piece about original sin, which is dominated much of Western Christianity. But he makes a clear distinction that maybe the conversation or narrative should not be so much about original sin.

Maybe it should be about original goodness of creation, but it also acknowledges that there is an original wound. Maybe it’s not so much about original sin, but there was an original wound. That original wound is multi-generational. It is inherited. It is handed down. When you begin to look at that, that there are original wounds in our individual lives, in our collective lives.

When you look at certain families, there are things that took place in that family system that impacted how we think as a family, impact how we see the world. Not just at a communal level, but sometimes just in that sphere of influence at the tribal level, and just becoming aware of that. There are some people who I know, for example, they yell a lot in families. This is how they communicate. It’s at a high octane.

We just talk loud. In other families, that just would be abnormal. But to just become aware, to understand that that’s how it is, there are reasons for that. Then to become conscious of that, change can take place. To be compassionate, not only on others, but to also be compassionate on ourself. To show some self-compassion, some self-love, some grace towards self, could also help us to be able to facilitate transformation and change, and healing and wholeness on our journey.

Barbara Holmes: It’s quite a journey that we’re on, isn’t it?

Donny Bryant: Yeah. I think the conversation about wounds is a complex conversation.

Barbara Holmes: Yes.

Donny Bryant: It’s easy to talk about the wounds of others, more difficult to talk about the wounds that are within our own.

Barbara Holmes: The wounds are openings, they’re portals. They’re an entryway to somewhere else within you, and sometimes they have to break open. Sometimes things happen in your life, you say, “Why did this happen?” Well, you have allowed a scar to heal over something that is festering, and it needs to be broken open. You need to break open. Sometimes the only way toward healing is brokenness. I look back over my life at some of the things I didn’t want to happen.

I prayed, “Where is God and why are you letting this happen?” When I look back, I realize, if it hadn’t happened, I wouldn’t be where I am. I wouldn’t be in a healthy path toward goodness, if what I chose for myself wasn’t snatched out of my aunts. A loving God says, “No, you can’t have that, or no, this relationship is over. It’s not going to work.” But I want it, God. Well, and there you are, pleading and begging for

something that is not in your good.

God says, “I don’t come here to harm you. I come to love you and to give to you, all of the abundance that I’ve created in this realm.” To understand that the breaking is a gift, that the wounding sometimes even is a gift. That healing will come, that it’s part of a process. We have free will to choose all of the most horrific things for ourselves that we could possibly choose. Sometimes the breaking for those called to a different purpose, sometimes the breaking is such a gift.

Donny Bryant: While using that as just what you said, Dr. B, the wounds can be portals. In our Christian tradition, the cross and the crucifixion are often seen as metaphors of woundings. The Passion of the Christ, the crucifixion, but the cross as a metaphor, embodies that portal. It embodies that pathway for healing.

It is a way of seeing, a way of experiencing, but really a pathway for transformation. A pathway for change and wholeness, ultimately healing and wholeness, back to that original goodness, if you will, of ultimate creation. This is a universal, this is just not a Christian metaphor.

Barbara Holmes: Oh, no.

Donny Bryant: For God so loved the world that He gave.

Barbara Holmes: Yes.

Donny Bryant: I think this is an important concept and principle that is universal. That is cosmic, in a sense that it has deep truths that are true for all of us, not just some of us.

Barbara Holmes: The path forward toward healing is through our wounds, not a path we want to take. But during the season of Lent, we’re reminded that by the stripes of Christ, wounds of Christ, we’re healed.

Donny Bryant: Dr. B, at the end of the chapter, you have several spiritual practices in the chapter of wounds, and I wanted to offer some of the reflections and practices to our listening audience. The first spiritual practice that you have, and it’s in the form of a question. Have you or a family or community member ever experienced a collective of historical trauma? A, what happened? B, if it was resolved, how? C, what did the members of the community do while it was happening?

You offer this opportunity for us to reflect on this question. In question two, Dr. B, you ask us to tell the story of a spiritual wound that you or someone close to you suffered when you were growing up. There are a couple more, but I think number one and two are more than enough for us to engage in our own individual, but also collective reflections. Begin the process and begin the journey of engaging in healing, and engaging in conversations, and engaging in a contemplative practice of processing wounds.

Barbara Holmes: Yeah. Because we are one people, trauma to one group is trauma for all of us, and our response to that trauma must be contemplative, activist, peaceful and relentless. We

can't give up in the face of trauma. We can't give up when the breaking occurs. We can let go, as we talked about in another chapter, but we never give up, not on one another and not on the divine.

Sometimes the healing of wounds is not within the realm of our human neighbors and must take place in nature. Sometimes you have to walk through a forest. You have to sit in the dark under trees and listen to the rustle and to their communication. Sometimes you have to walk by the open sea and watch the clouds floating by. We are as much a part of nature, as the plants and the trees and the skies, and sometimes our healing can be found there.

Donny Bryant:

Beautiful. Thank you, Dr. B. Thanks for listening to this episode on wounds. In this episode, we framed the conversation around the question, where does trauma go? We shed a spotlight on the fact that trauma has to go somewhere. That many of us do not recognize that oftentimes the trauma, the wound that we have experienced individually and corporately or communally, is in fact being reflected.

It's being coped with. It's being mirrored in ways that oftentimes are not beneficial or even healthy. In this chapter, we shed a light on that, and in the next chapter, we want to discuss the communal response or the village response, and how that plays a role in our journey back to healing. Thanks for listening.