

My American Story

A contemporary tale of two identities.

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[Waves crashing nearby]

It's the sound of my alarm clock going off.

Exhausted and uninspired,

I realize it's time to start my day.

Another day in which I have a role to play.

A role I was hired to play five to six days a week.

As I finish my morning routine,

I have 30 mins until I am expected to be on stage.

So I straighten my hair,

Shield my natural curves with loose-fitted clothing,

Readjust the natural timbre of my voice,

And leave my racial identity backstage.

Holding back tears, I walk on stage and play the part I'm

requested to play.

This is my American story.

When I moved to New York City in 2008, I was full of hope, charisma, self-expression and drive, ready to take on my next challenge: venturing into the world of advertising. For years, I was enamored by the dynamic culture of the ad industry, especially the creative aspects of visual artistry and community comradery amongst colleagues.

I was fortunate enough to dip my toe into the industry a few years prior as an intern and later a full-time employee at an agency based in San Antonio, Texas. It was here that I had the great fortune of collaborating with one of the top ad agencies in New York City. I befriended one of the account executives there and would later meet her on a trip to NYC in winter 2006. This brief encounter would be the catalyst for my eventual move to NYC two years later and the start of an expanding career. Unfortunately, this would later turn into a gut-wrenching and heartbreaking reality check, leading to my eventual departure from not only the advertising industry, but from the corporate world altogether due to years of discrimination.

While my experience involved making the tough personal decision to leave behind financial security and a 10-year career, it launched me on a path of exploring ways in which our communities could come together so that other African American women and women of color wouldn't have to sacrifice their careers and could be seen authentically in the workplace.

My Hair. My Skin. My Tone. My Name.

Imagine for a moment your favorite vinyl record player spinning the classic tune "Four Women" by Nina Simone. "My skin is black. My arms are long. My hair is woolly. My back is strong ..." The song goes on, describing the experiences of four Black women living in America, defined not by the content of their character or expertise, but by the color of their skin, the definition

of their hair, the tonality of their voice, and the spelling and pronunciation of their name.

This is what it means to be a Black woman in America.

When I listen to this song, I always think about my first advertising job in NYC. So young and full of heart, ready to take this new path toward my career goals in the ad industry. When I first started working there, I was strongly advised to straighten my hair (at the time I had a mid-sized afro) to look more "professional." My colleagues were also curious to see what my hair would look like if it were straight. At the time, it didn't seem like an odd comment; yet reflecting on this situation years later, I realized how discriminating this exchange was. Why were my white female colleagues never asked to change their hairstyles?

In Western society, natural African hairstyles have always been a hot topic, and in many states across America, companies still have the option to terminate or not hire someone based on the "unprofessionalism" of their hairstyle. In 2019, California became the first state to ban discrimination based on one's natural hair. (Díaz and Willon, 2019) I was shocked to learn that this was not outlawed decades before. The ban prohibits companies from enforcing discriminatory grooming policies based on certain hairstyles that are typically worn in African American communities: braids, afros, dreadlocks, etc. New York became the second state to do so shortly after California. (Griffith, 2019) My experience of being coerced into straightening my hair for the approval of others is an experience I will never forget; it took years for me to regain my confidence in owning my hair identity.

There were a slew of other racially involved experiences, including direct superiors demanding I use a different vocal tone to appear less "threatening," a supervisor requesting I wear clothing that would hide my curvy figure, and — to my shock and hor-

ror — a chief marketing officer who couldn't pronounce my name deciding to call me "Karen" instead.

When I began to reflect on all of these experiences, I realized: *There is a tremendous lack of empathy, equality-centered comradery, accountability and compassionate leadership* in our American society, especially in the workplace. Why were people, like myself, having to shrink or hide our identities for the comfort of others? Isn't there space for everyone's story and identity? What are the root causes of such disheartened behaviors within our society? These questions led me on a quest toward finding tangible solutions rooted in collective healing.

Where Collective Healing Begins

Our corporate systems and cultures are built on education, economic and social structures that make it nearly impossible to crack the foundations of inequality within them. As a result, the stories and historical backgrounds of minority communities have largely been ignored and excluded from the mainstream framework and acceptable ideologies of American culture, leading to millions of Americans having countless racialized experiences within and outside of the workplace.

We are now at a crucial point where we must begin to actively engage in transforming these systematic issues around race whereby every person's history and experience matters. Below, I have laid out three key components I feel are critical to igniting this process of transformation: (1) **vulnerability** (empathy + compassion), (2) **accountability** (unlearning + re-education), and (3) **allyship** (community + unity). Incorporating this process into our daily lives opens a new pathway where the experiences and histories of Black and Brown communities alike are validated and respected, allowing their stories and identities to become an acceptable and necessary component of American history.



1. Vulnerability (Empathy + Compassion).

Approaching subjects such as race and America's colonial past tend to be very sensitive for most people as it involves facing a reality that is uncharted territory for those who don't have a direct connection to both. However, these are topics that must be addressed for our desired unity. The first step involves the process of vulnerability. Dr. Brené Brown defines vulnerability as "uncertainty, risk and emotional exposure." (DeBara, 2018)

Based on Dr. Brown's definition, I pose the question: How can white communities incorporate *uncertainty, risk and emotional exposure* when it comes to racial inequality in social and professional settings? I believe it begins with embodying both empathy and compassion toward minority communities. If we can take a moment to step back, pause, reflect and listen to minority communities without judgement, we activate our emotional sensors, exposing us to feel in ways that we may not have before. This allows for us to open our hearts to seeing how our collective reality is not inclusive for every American.

From this realization, we activate the next stage, which involves *accountability*.

2. Accountability (Unlearning + Re-education)

Accountability involves holding space for one's vulnerability, which

leads to self-reflection. Self-reflection is the practice of reviewing how one's actions affect our immediate environment. On a societal level, it involves reflecting on how our collective actions have affected collective outcomes. In this instance, when reflecting on race and America's colonial past, accountability involves understanding how our current structures and workplace cultures, in particular, have been rooted in a white-male, Euro-centric patriarchal system, leaving no room for the possibility of a new framework that incorporates the safe inclusion of minority communities.

In order to move in a direction of total inclusivity, we have to honestly look at how our education system has failed to transparently explain the histories of both African Americans and Indigenous communities. This lack of transparency has led to enormous levels of misinformation and naiveté when it comes to minority communities, leaving ample space for discriminatory behavior toward them.

So this leaves us with the task of unlearning much of what we have been taught to allow for the process of re-education. I believe that we have a collective responsibility to understand every aspect of our past in order to proceed into a healthier future, equally.

3. Allyship (Community + Unity)

Once the process of unlearning and re-education is activated and engaged, we have a much more solid founda-

tion for consistent and sustainable allyship. To me, allyship means being able to see each other as one community while simultaneously celebrating cultural, racial, religious and sexual orientation differences. In the workplace, allyship begins when we see every co-worker as a human being living a human experience.

African American women are often advised to dim their light in order to "fit in" to the corporate patriarchal culture so as to not make others uncomfortable or hurt someone else's chances for advancement. (Cheeks, 2018) Every person deserves space to be their authentic self, at all times. Instead of erasing someone's identity, let's embrace and celebrate them. We all have something *magical* to contribute to the world. Allyship is seeing the magic in everyone and lifting them up through support and comradery.

Vulnerability + Accountability + Allyship = Healing

The steps listed above are just a few ingredients we can add to our daily lives that enhance our abilities to see each other without prejudice. Incorporating vulnerability + accountability + allyship = creating a beautiful, alchemic journey that will not only heal our immediate environments, but allow us to heal ourselves as well, transforming society at large, one person at a time. And by doing so, I firmly believe that we will finally be able to heal America. ♦

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Creativity at Leisure Care Communities

Leisure Care communities across the country have become even more creative in their efforts to engage residents over the past few months.

Knowing that writing is a great way to relieve stress and anxiety, The Carillon at Boulder Creek, a Leisure Care community, held a poetry contest for residents to write about this unprecedented time.

Resident Joan Patch won with the following poem. We believe this poem summarizes how so many of our residents and staff are feeling as we patiently, but expectantly, wait for the day when we can all be together again post-COVID.

*Staying at home
Told not to roam
Wish I could see
Someone else, not just me.*

*Relief not tomorrow
Much to my sorrow
Just have to wait
For an all clear date.*

*Masks on our faces
When out of our places
Meetings on Zoom
No public places.*

*Then we'll open our doors
On all of our floors
Say hi to our friends
Isolation ends!*

 the
CARILLON
AT BOULDER CREEK

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