

A Time to Heal

*"I choose to create in my daily life/ spaces of reconciliation and forgiveness/
Where I let go of past hurt, fear and shame/ And hold each other close/
It is only in the act and practice/Of loving Blackness/That we are able
to reach and embrace the world/ Without destructive bitterness/And ongoing
collective rage."
– bell hooks (1992)*

It was 4 p.m. in the afternoon, and the CEO, the senior manager, and two co-chairs of the annual gala for my organization were having a meeting in the boardroom next door to my office. At the same time, I was leaving the office, and as I began to close my office door and head downstairs to the exit, I heard, "Where are you going? It's not 5 o'clock!" I quickly reached for the stair handrail to prevent myself from falling, as the yelling terrified me. Immediately, the manager in the meeting said to the CEO, "Oh my God! What are you doing?"

I slowly turned around to look in the direction of the loud, shouting voice. I was shocked and wondering what I did to provoke such a reaction. Not knowing what to do or how to respond, I turned back around, feeling demeaned and humiliated, and quickly continued down the stairs and left. I was in disbelief about what had just happened to me in my office at work. And from the reaction of the witnessing manager, it was clear that she too was shocked about what she had just witnessed.

That evening when I reached home, through my tears I managed to share with my husband what had happened to me at work. We discussed the invisibility and dehumanization that Black women experience daily in the workplace and the emotional tax we bare. I also shared that I had never seen the CEO treat other women or colleagues in this manner. I worked in a predominately white environment, and I was the only person of colour. My husband encouraged me to schedule a meeting with my boss the next day to share what had happened and to get support on how to address this issue.



In an instant, the workplace that I'd once thought was safe and fun had become a stressful and scary place to be. I was frightened at the thought of telling my boss how the CEO's inappropriate behaviour affected me.

When I met with my boss the following day and explained what happened, she laughed and said, "Oh, you know how the CEO can be. He's crazy. Do not take it personally. Just forget about it." As I sat there trying to express how I felt and describe the impact of what I had experienced, I could clearly see my boss getting

irritated and wanting to move on with other priorities of the day. Sadly, my boss's response reinforced for me as a Black woman that we do not have many safe spaces to air our grievances and be vulnerable.

According to McKinsey's *Women in the Workplace 2018* survey, "Women of colour are not only significantly underrepresented, they are far less likely than others to be promoted to manager, more likely to face everyday discrimination and less likely to receive support from their managers." Another study, *Workplace Harassment: Double Jeopardy for Minority Women* published in the *Journal of Applied Psychology*, noted that Black women in particular are found to be the group most likely to experience harassment in the workplace. A third study, *Discrimination and Work Evaluation* from the National Bureau of Economic Research study further stated that Black workers are "held to a higher standard than white workers, ensuring shorter employment duration among Blacks."

Over the ensuing weeks and months, my work environment became incredibly difficult. I was continuously reminded of how I was being treated in the workplace by the most senior person in the organization. I felt helpless, and no one, including the HR office, was prepared to help or support me. The situation was stressful and impacting my health, as I was having trouble sleeping and eating.

I knew continuing in this way would be neither healthy nor productive. So, I made the decision to take charge of my situation and began the process of healing by developing a wellness plan for myself. I chose to do what I'd witnessed in my upbringing among strong Black women in my life. I participated in a female support group. I reached out to other Black women in my network. I was looking for an informal circle where women could gather to share their stress, their pain and their hopes for the future

At times, I am that "one" that surprised you. And there are times where it doesn't matter who or what I am, because you knew who I was the instant you saw me.

– Angela Gray, *HuffPost Contributor*

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huffpost.com/entry/no-pressure_b_1657169

in a safe and nurturing space, and also discuss the realities of Black Canadian women in North America in white-dominated workplaces. It was vital for me to be part of a community of Black women from whom I could draw strength, advice and counsel. Notably, it has been "studied and verified in the *Harvard Medical Journal* that there is healing power when women seek friendship and sisterhood," according to *Ebony* magazine.

As a Black woman and a professional fundraiser, the further I advance in my career, I am often the "only" person of colour in the department, office, or organization. As a result, and out of necessity, my work has had to be twice as good in order to go half as far. I am acutely aware that I am being watched more closely than my white colleagues. The impact of this kind of scrutiny over time has had an impact on my physical, emotional, and mental health. Despite the pain, anger and negative experiences, I have endured, and I have learned the power of resiliency that I witnessed in my childhood from powerful women like my mother and grandmothers.

In the article "Keeping Ourselves Sane: A Qualitative Exploration of Black Women's Coping Strategies for Gendered Racism," published in *Sex Roles: A Journal of Research*, the authors write that, "Black women rely heavily on their networks as a means of coping with life's struggles. This reliance manifests itself through women's family, friends and church. Some research describes an intricate system of supportive kinship transactions for Black families that may replace personal coping resources."

As a coping strategy, I knew it was important, as part of my healing process, to connect and communicate with my ancestors. Opening up to our African ancestors is a powerful experience, as I am reminded every day that I am standing on the shoulders of great men and women who persevered and endured many struggles and adversities. Connecting with my African history allows me to understand and recognize my ancestral legacy and the amazing resilience and strength of those who came before me.

And as a Black woman, I have that same strength in my DNA.

At the time of the incident at my office, I chose not to confront the CEO, as I had witnessed the negative consequences other Black women in my network had faced for speaking out, and I was afraid of experiencing the same abuse. So today, I invest my energy in mentoring, fostering, and empowering young Black women who are entering the fundraising profession. They will inevitably experience some form of abuse and/or discrimination. The young Black women I have the privilege of working with are more self-confident and self-aware as they're starting out than I was. I am committed to doing for them what I did not have the courage to do—stand up for myself. I am also helping shape the narratives surrounding Black women in white workplaces by fighting to ensure that our voices are not discounted and our contributions respected. Black women need to be afforded the same space and time in the workplace to work in their truth and authenticity.

Note: Names and identifying details have been changed for privacy purposes.



From childhood, Muthoni fell in love with nonprofits working alongside her parents who valued the power of giving back to the communities they lived in. Her parents instilled in her that our lives become meaningful through the impact we make on others, more so than living and working just for ourselves. Muthoni quickly developed a deep passion for charitable work, and in particular, fundraising. This resolve stuck with her through her undergraduate education, ultimately leading her to obtain her Master's degree in Philanthropy and Non-profit Leadership (MPNL) from Carleton University. Muthoni is a Certified Fund Raising Executive (CFRE) who spends her days assisting donors realize their potential to make an impact through the power of philanthropy. When Muthoni isn't fundraising, you'll find her early in the morning at the gym where she goes to begin her day. However, her most important valued time is spent with family and friends.