

Kindred Memory

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Topic: Explore the meaning of memory and ancestry in Butler's *Kindred*. How might our own deep re-examination of our ancestry and the memories/stories of our past, remembered, or reconstructed, help us minister more effectively in the present?

“It takes strength to remember, it takes another kind of strength to forget, it takes a hero to do both. People who remember court madness through pain, the pain of the perpetually recurring death of their innocence; people who forget court another kind of madness, the madness of the denial of pain and the hatred of innocence; and the world is mostly divided between madmen who remember and madmen who forget. Heroes are rare.”¹

—James Baldwin

Memory

For many of us, enculturated and shaped by Eurocentric frameworks, and “google brain,” the term memory connotes simply the ability to *recall*. Where did I leave my car keys? What were the key points of contention in the Western Unitarian Conference? What did that congregant say to me in our last meeting about their family history? Although brain science explains memory as a complex system of storage whereby groups of neurons are primed to fire together in the same area of the brain and the same patterns that created the original experience, in an organic dance of wonder, we often resort to the metaphor of a filing system or a database. Memory is reduced to accurate record keeping, and documentation of events retrieved when

¹ James Baldwin, Quote from *Giovanni's Room*, <https://www.goodreads.com/work/quotes/814207>.

needed. Memory is individual. Memory is mechanistic, untrustworthy if it is not photographic, and utterly soulless.

Memory as *recall* may serve a society ever propelled to move faster, get smaller, and more “convenient,” but it will not serve us in our racial justice journey, nor cure what ails us. So many facets of memory and its power are left on the cutting room floor in this iteration. The whole cloth of memory is more colorful, intricate, wild, patterned, nuanced, relational, and encompassing than *recall*.

In the Griot traditions of West Africa, the griot artist is the living memory of the people. Traditionally, the griot were a caste of people dating from 13thC and charged with singing and storying history in the oral tradition. Often likened to a baobab tree, the griot absorbs the stories, the lineage, the histories of a people like water during the rainy season; and like the baobab, produces incredibly dense and nutritious fruit that feeds and nourishes, even when everything around is dried up and parched. Griots recite lineage and historical events with incredible accuracy and beauty, but they are also weavers into the future. As the beloved Senegalese film director, Djibril Diop Mambéty said: “the word griot (...) is the word for what I do and the role that the filmmaker has in society... the griot is a messenger of one’s time, a visionary and the creator of the future.”² The griot is part artist, part healer, part historian, part minister, part storyteller, part messenger, all in service of a people’s memory, this place where past meets present and in so doing, feeds and envisions future.

In ancient Greece, the great Goddess Mnemosyne, or *Memory*, was the keeper of life through remembrance. She had nine daughters who were called the Muses. Because their father

² John James, “The Griots of West Africa – Much More Than Story-Tellers” Word of Mouth, Goethe Institut, 2012, <http://www.goethe.de/ins/za/prj/wom/osm/en9606618.htm>.

was Zeus, the one who discerns the truth, the Muses honored their lineage with truthful tellings. All artists, including myself, hope to be captured by that intangible thing, by the muse, in order to speak truthfully and compellingly about the human condition through our art form. Memory is more than a repository of dead things and ideas. Mnemosyne is a living stage, where the Muses perform the storied, sung, languaged memory of our lives, individually and collectively. The artist is the link between memory and meaning.

In these two examples and in so many others, memory is more like relationship than recall. Memory is not only in the human brain, it is located in the human heart, a prompting beyond ourselves that evokes an inspired telling. This brings us to another place of memory and knowing, and this is the memory living in the body; our individual bodies, our generational bodies, in the body and flesh of the world. Memoria of the flesh is more than metaphysical hyperbole, or a spiritual conviction.

New understandings in psychobiology reveal that our strongest emotions—our disgust, our sense of safety and wellbeing, our sense of danger, our sorrows, our hope—are not held in our cognitive brain but in a complex weaving of nerves throughout the body. This network connects to our brainstem (our lizard brain), our gut, our throat, our heart, our lungs and spine. It is called the *vagus nerve* or the *wandering nerve*. It does not use our cognitive capacity or reasoning to navigate the world, but instead is the body's memory organ negotiating between *acting* and *resting* at any given moment.

I've stood backstage numerous times throughout my career as a performing artist guzzling water because I'm so thirsty. It doesn't matter how much I drink, my throat seems dry as I am about to make my entrance. Many performers, and singers will attest to this very same

experience. This is the *vagus* nerve, the body's memory organ at work. To sing in front of a group of people whether it's a group of fifty or a thousand, is an out of the ordinary event. My body perceives it as unsafe, and it responds. My heart beats a little faster. My throat constricts, and I'm thirsty. I've since learned that all of the water I'm downing is actually going to my major muscle groups, instead of my throat. My body is getting ready to run, to get as far away from this unnatural activity as possible. My cognitive brain may assure with all kinds of reasons and rhetoric about how this performance will go well, but in the folds of the curtains, I'm still incredibly thirsty.

In his groundbreaking book entitled, *My Grandmother's Hands: Racialized Trauma and the Pathway to Mending Our Hearts and Bodies*, Resmaa Menakem calls the vagus nerve, the soul nerve.

“The body is where we live. It's where we fear, hope, and react. It's where we constrict and relax. And what the body most cares about are safety and survival. When something happens to the body that is too much, too fast, or too soon, it overwhelms the body and can create trauma....Trauma is not primarily an emotional response. Trauma always happens in the body. It is a spontaneous protective mechanism used by the body to stop or thwart further (or future) potential damage.”³

Menakem's central focus is the body's memory and its responses to the trauma inducing framework of “white-body supremacy.”⁴ He invites us to work with the memory of the flesh, with our soul nerve, in order to disrupt and erode this all-encompassing framework of

³ Resmaa Menakem, *My Grandmother's Hands: Racialized Trauma and the Pathway to Mending Our Hearts and Bodies* (Las Vegas, NV: Central Recovery Press, 2017) , 7.

⁴ Menakem uses the term *white body supremacy* to continue to emphasize that trauma inducing structures are not simply understood in our cognitive awareness but in our bodies.

domination, hatred and violence that was embedded in this country's DNA from the beginning so that we might grow up and heal.

In her essay, "False memories, true memory and maybes," writer, therapist Lynn Cowan quotes the 18th C rabbi, Baal Shem Tov: "In remembrance is the beginning of redemption." She continues, "Redemption comes through being able to carry the past, however heavy the burden, because forgetting means to become uprooted, one-dimensional, flat, psychopathic. The capacity to feel deeply is in part dependent on the ability to remember images of deeply felt experience...images stored in that living psychic temple named Mnemosyne."⁵ Memory is the hero's journey, as James Baldwin so succinctly describes.

Kindred Memory

It is from this whole cloth of memory, that Octavia Butler sews her novel *Kindred* and invites us to take the hero's journey. She will not let us avert our eyes from the heavy burden of our past, our nation's soul memory, regardless of what color our skin may be. In the Critical Essay found at the end of *Kindred*, Robert Crossley tells the story of Butler coming to work with her mother as a housemaid, and observing the *far reach of slavery* into her present day as her mother entered through backdoors, was talked about while present, and basically treated like a non-person, something beneath notice.⁶ Butler also described a time in college when she heard an African American classmate express feelings of being held back by the older generation and wishing that they would just die off. She remembers thinking, he knows a lot about black history but "he's not feeling this in his gut."⁷ It was in the confluence of remembrance of her mother's

⁵ Lynn Cowan, "False memories, true memory and maybes," in *Tracking the White Rabbit: a subversive view of modern culture* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 57.

⁶ Larry McCaffery, "An Interview with Octavia E. Butler," in *Across the Wounded Galaxies: Interviews with Contemporary American Science Fiction Writers* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1990), 65.

⁷ Ibid.

experience and a classmate's dismissal of trauma, and resilience, that Octavia envisioned her novel of memory.

Memory is the impetus of *Kindred's* creation, the living stage in which the story takes place, and like the griot, Octavia is part artist, part healer, part historian, part minister, part storyteller, part messenger all in service of a truthful telling of our history, the deeply felt experience carried in our bodies where past meets present and in so doing, feeds and envisions future.

I lost an arm on my last trip home. My left arm. And I lost about a year of my life and much of the comfort and security I had not valued until it was gone.

The trouble began long before June 9, 1976, when I became aware of it, but June 9 is the day I remember.

The house, the books, everything vanished. Suddenly, I was outdoors kneeling on the ground beneath trees. I was in a green place....Before me was a wide tranquil river, and near the middle of that river was a child splashing, screaming...Drowning!⁸

Within the first few pages of the novel, Butler sketches out the flow of this particular truthful telling. The novel begins with a warning: If we choose to venture onto the living stage of memory in the work of racial justice, remembering how, and why, the racial paradigm was created, enforced, and what it did and still does to people, we will be changed in dramatic ways. There will be no way to unsee what we see, or unknow what we discover. Like the main

⁸ Octavia Butler, *Kindred* (Boston, Beacon Press, 1979) Digital.

character, Dana, the young African American protagonist, who loses her arm up to the elbow, we will not be able to keep this knowing at arm's length. The story demands heroic memory work.

At first, memory work is something sensed more than recalled. *The trouble starts* long before we cognitively understand what's happening. Dana's body is physically transported into the antebellum south in Butler's ingenious twist on time travel. Dana is celebrating her twenty-sixth birthday. She has just moved into a new house from an apartment setting with her white husband, Kevin. Maybe it's the permanency of building a new home together while glossing over the frameworks of oppression so present in, among and beyond, that makes Dana vulnerable to the slip stream of time. Maybe it's sorting through all the books, these symbols of wisdom and storied memory that makes her dizzy, and her vision blur. Whatever the opening, she is sucked into another place, another time.

In essence, we time travel frequently in the stories our bodies tell us when something happens or has happened, or is triggered that feels like *too much, too fast, too soon*. Our thinking brain is circumvented and our time traveling soul nerve which is connected to our most basic, physicalized thinking, the lizard brain, kicks into gear. We want to *fight, freeze* or *flee*. Those are the options. Menakem explains in his book that white-body supremacy is always functioning in our bodies. It is the air we breathe, and the water in which we swim. We are inundated with its trauma and retraumatizing pricks, punches, constrictions and death blows regardless of where we are placed in its infrastructure. In essence, our bodies are time traveling when we freak out over a seemingly small problem; when we carry a constant sense of worry, or dread that something bad is going to happen any moment, when we recreate a near replica of an earlier trauma in our lives

perhaps trying to embody a different outcome,⁹ but usually inflicting even more damage, and embedding the trauma even deeper in our being. All of this is the body remembering and trying to protect itself from further trauma. Our bodies tell stories of memory to us. They also communicate those stories through the generations “through families in which one family member abuses or mistreats another, through unsafe or abusive systems, structures, institutions and/or cultural norms, and through our genes...passed on in our DNA expression, through biochemistry.”¹⁰ We are drowning in a river of stories, a river of memories, particularly in the pervasive structures of racism and white supremacy. In Dana’s first time travel event she finds herself at the edge of a river. This is the river of memory beside which we all kneel. Whatever compels us to jump in: our troubled child, the bigoted reactions we embody regardless of our heartfelt efforts, or our drowning ancestor, we must jump in order to feel history in our gut. The hero’s journey is to work with memory, love it, hate it, converse with it, accompany it until we find our way to some kind of salvation, some form of wholeness.

There are so many aspects of memory and trauma woven throughout *Kindred* but I will highlight two. First is the all encompassing, soul corroding nature of white-body supremacy, as a life shaping framework for everyone regardless of skin color or societal standing. Menakem drives home the same point. He asks a pivotal question in the opening pages of his book: “Why after nearly three decades of earnestly trying to address racism and white supremacy through dialogue, education, and mental training are black bodies still being destroyed?”¹¹ His answer is that we are focusing our attention in the wrong direction, that everyone, regardless of skin color

⁹ Examples given by Menakem in *My Grandmother’s Hands*, 8-9.

¹⁰ Resmaa Menakem, *My Grandmother’s Hands*, 10.

¹¹ Resmaa Menakem, *My Grandmother’s Hands*, 10.

or culture must work with our bodies and the whole cloth of memory in order for us to create something new.

In *Kindred*, Dana meets her ancestors as children, her several times great grandmother Alice, who is the African American daughter of a free woman and several times great grandfather, Rufus, who is the white son of a slave owner, and will inherit the plantation once he is of age. There are tender and shocking exchanges between Dana and her ancestors throughout.

She experiences the everydayness of slavery and racism in her second encounter with Rufus in his boyhood bedroom. She is trying to understand what is happening and this other worldly connection she has with a boy who has summoned her from her life into his, this allegory of the *far reach of slavery*.

In the opening conversation between Rufus and Dana, Butler outlines the cycle of trauma and violence embedded in American society with the whipping of children, regardless of color, the clearly defined categories of people as fully human (white) and subhuman (POCI), the delineation of power structures that supersede everything, and are consciously and brutally asserted. There is a magical connection and genuine affection between Dana and her white ancestor. Dana thinks, "*What we had was something new, something that didn't even have a name. Some matching strangeness in us that may or may not have come from our being related.*"¹²

It is Rufus who helps Dana connect the dots and to find her several times over great grandmother, Alice. Having made her way through the wooded countryside, she watches in frozen horror as Alice's father is dragged from a cabin and whipped. Her mother, a free woman still shackled in the well defined color code, is stripped naked and denigrated. Butler wants us to

¹² Octavia Butler, *Kindred*, Digital.

feel this scene in the gut. She knows how easy it is to distance ourselves from the horror of our history, the sweat, the pleading, the praying, the shaming that corrodes the spirit. As Alice cries over her unconscious mother, Dana introduces herself to her ancestor, and the living stage of memory is set.

Regardless of affections, good heartedness or good intentions, Butler makes clear that the power of white supremacy and the practices of hatred and violence embedded in our country's DNA is all consuming and corrosive. Rufus evolves from a curious, and fairly likable kid, into a erratic, vicious manipulator, an untrustworthy helper and often time despot. Alice is trapped in a maze of bad options. Slavery scars her psyche, brutalizes her body, and ultimately kills her. Both Dana and Kevin (Dana's husband) find themselves sucked into impossible choices, and it marks them. The power of white supremacy overwhelms the best of intentions. It disfigures affections. And like all trauma inducing events, it embeds in the memory of the body, passed down through generations. It also feels "like home." In one of the more insightful exchanges between Dana and Kevin as they sort out what they are remembering, experiencing and trying to hold on to their sanity, they acknowledge the "home" quality of institutionalized racism.

The other aspect of memory work made clear in *Kindred* is the power of covenantal love. Intimate and messy, a covenant of love made between people has the power to keep us sane and resilient. The spoken and embodied covenant of marriage made between Dana and Kevin, or Nigel and Carrie acted as a homing device that helped each character to remember who they were and to whom they truly belonged. The bonds of covenantal love emerge between people caught in the grips of brutality and are a saving grace. With the offering of food, the tending of

wounds, teaching someone to read, helping covertly or at great personal cost, covenantal love is subversive and sustaining.

Still there are absolutely no guarantees. The covenantal bonds of family are not a guarantee. Promising to hold true to what is right and good is not enough. There is a covenant of love between Dana and Rufus, *something new* that binds them together across time, *a matching strangeness* that each acknowledges and yet the magic of their connection cannot hold. In the final conversation between Rufus and Dana, Rufus wants Dana to save him. He wants covenant on the cheap: “Tell me I can trust you!” Dana responds, “You keep doing things that make it impossible for me to trust you—even though you know it has to work both ways.”¹³ There is a confounding dynamic that Butler points to in this exchange and Menakem explains through our remembering bodies. White body supremacy has conjured images of black bodies as threatening, while impervious to pain, incredibly strong, almost invulnerable, and therefore in need of management and control by whatever means necessary. At the same time, because white bodies are imaged as incredibly weak in comparison, it is the job of black bodies to comfort, and soothe them.¹⁴ Black bodies are called on to help white bodies no matter what white bodies dish out. I can’t help but harken to the question often posed by my white congregants: “Why aren’t there more people of color in our church?” There was a time when I might have asked the same question were it not for the truth loving souls who have shared what it’s like to be welcomed profusely as a visitor when they’ve been a member of the church for years, or sitting through small group circles where white folk discuss whether or not racism exists for whites as well as POCI folk. There are a myriad of ways in which our congregations want covenant on the cheap.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Chapter 7, “The False Fragility of the White Body” from Resmaa Menakem’s, *My Grandmother’s Hands*.

Many of our white congregants don't want to hear or are oblivious to the sacrifices made by POCI folk to even walk through our doors and navigate the "soft bigotry of self-contradictory American liberals."¹⁵

The novel ends with a trip back to Maryland and the old plantation. Nothing is left, not even names on a gravestone, but all of the history, the trauma, the wounds and the resilience has been passed down from body to body, soul to soul through families and institutions. As Kevin and Dana stand in the courthouse scanning old documents for remnants of what they lived, what is remembered in their bodies, Butler points to covenantal love as the best chance we have to erode the constructs of the white supremacist framework. Covenants are not ironclad. Covenants may need to be severed in order for the body/spirit to survive. Still, the basic tenets of covenant are worthy. Covenant tethers us to compassion. It provides enough ballast to help us in truth telling, It pushes us to continue. It keeps us sane, helps us find sustenance in understanding, and maybe, just maybe we may be redeemed.

My Kindred Memory

Menakem encourages us to begin to work with this all encompassing framework of white supremacy from the whole cloth of memory, just as Butler illustrates in her novel. Just as Dana reasons, rages, questions, and cares for her ancestors that are around her, and that she carries within her, Menakem wants us to do the same. To follow the breadcrumbs embedded in our soul nerve, our constrictions, our comfort, our sense of wellbeing and our sense of danger as a means

¹⁵ Eddi S. Gluade, Jr., "Don't Let the Loud Bigots Distract You. American's Real Problem with Race Cuts Far Deeper", Time Magazine, Sept. 2018, <http://time.com/5388356/our-racist-soul/>.

to be in dialogue, and relationship with our ancestry and oppressive structures housed within our being.

Menakem pulls no punches as he describes the trauma this country has meted out on black and brown bodies, but he makes the argument that white people need to explore their own historical trauma, trauma that they carry in their bodies from their countries of origin, experienced through white on white violence, torture, mutilation, starvation, and death during the middle ages and forward. This is what white bodies carried to the new world, four hundred plus years ago, the trauma of powerful white bodies inflicting violence on less powerful white bodies.

Menakem argues that this collective trauma stored in the bodies of white people evolved into an emerging white supremacist framework whereby “white Americans try to soothe the dissonance between the powerful and the less powerful white bodies; to blow centuries of white on white trauma through millions of Black and red bodies...The phantasm of race was conjured to help white people manage their fear and hatred of other white people.”¹⁶

I sat with the concept of the conjuring of race as a means to help white people manage their fear and hatred of other white people for a very long time this winter. I wondered, “What are the wordless stories, the trauma that is carried in my white body, not just family trauma, but historical and generational trauma? What are my trauma responses lived, or historical that keep me quiet when I need to speak up, that make me walk around rather than directly toward? What are ways that I can work with my own trauma to be a more grounded, helpful, direct, and loving presence in the work for racial justice? This is the pivotal question for all of us as we endeavor to minister more effectively in our congregations at different places in our work for racial justice.

¹⁶ Menakem, *My Grandmother's Hands*, 63.

The living stage of memory has led me to Macon, Georgia, and the hollers of North Carolina, where my people learned from centuries of being lorded over and used as fodder and human weaponry in the border wars between Scotland and England to trust no one but clan, no one but family. They soldiered on the side of the Union not because they had any sympathies for the plight of their African American neighbors but because the “Lords of the Deep South” were writing about enslaving *inferior whites*,¹⁷ the Scot-Irish, in their next money making venture. My people knew that tune all too well.

My journey has led me to the tiny village of Aastrup Falster where my great grandparents were born and raised, and along with ten percent of the Danish population, left the country in the late 1800s because they were starving. Almost a quarter of Denmark’s land mass had been lost to Germany in the mid 1800s in the Slesvig-Holsten conflict, compounded with the fact that the population of Denmark was growing rapidly. My people were not very different from the immigrants and refugees of today. They left to survive.

My great grandparents headed for Nebraska. Danes, it is often written, assimilated the most quickly into the “American way of life” out of all the Nordic ethnicities. When I read this in the history books, I read: my people became *white* as quickly as they could. They took advantage of institutionalized racism in the form of the Homestead Act of 1862, instituted by President Lincoln, making land available "for free" to white people who lived on and cultivated a tract for a period of time. At the same time, the US government under Lincoln, nullified treaties with native peoples right and left, systematically and intentionally killed native leaders, and led

¹⁷ Colin Woodard, *American Nations: A History of the Eleven Rival Regional Cultures of North America*(New York:Penguin Books, 2011), 236.

to the ethnic cleansing of native peoples in the midwest and western states to encourage white settlements.

My family's trauma fit perfectly within the well-established white supremacist framework whereby the very violence and oppression that was visited on them by more powerful white people, my family visited on the brown bodies of Nebraska, the Omaha and the Dakota, who were trying to hold onto their way of life.

There is a story I heard as a child from an old family friend who lived in Nebraska at the same time my great grandparents settled there. She told me that it was not an infrequent experience to have the door of her family's sod house thrown open, with emaciated, starving people, indigenous to the area, begging or demanding food. I have to believe this happened to my ancestors as well, and it breaks my heart to think about it. I doubt they invited those people into their home given the awful stories about native folk that were circulating at that time. I'm fairly certain my Danish ancestors soothed the dissonance and danger they experienced in their country of origin between the powerful and the less powerful and blew centuries of white on white violence through the brown bodies they encountered in this country.

In many of the rivers of ancestry that course through my veins there is carelessness and often times brutal practices in the rearing of children. Children are whipped, sent out to work in the fields at incredibly young ages, abandoned to orphanages, adopted and then given back, and adopted again. Women and girls were and in some family circles still are considered less than. Rapes, incest, children out of wedlock, and abortions abound. When I think of what my parents had to work with within these cultural contexts I count myself as lucky.

Some of my soul work of late has been reclassifying the woundings I've attributed to a dysfunctional family, to cultural traumas passed down through the generations. When I freak out over a seemingly small problem and catastrophize what might happen, I'm beginning to understand this reaction as not just a personal shortcoming, but a soul wound I'm carrying on behalf of my ancestors. When perfectionism looms large in the viewfinder, I start talking to my great grandparents, the ones who became *white* as quickly as possible. I explain that when you give up culture for a better standing in the power structure, there is nothing left but productivity, and perfecting one's output. It may have been the only choice they could conceive of at the time, but it was a poor trade.

Menakem says it straight on, "If we don't address our ancient historical trauma, what will we pass down to our children, and to their children and their grandchildren?"¹⁸

So What?

Our communities of faith gather in *some kind of matching strangeness*. We aspire to a covenant of love, but it cannot be done on the cheap. We can't just say we are bound in covenant. We have to embody it. This means sitting in circles of truthful telling, of talking openly about where we come from and listening deeply to the truthful telling of others. It means truthful telling not only when it feels safe but when it's scary. Covenantal love means being willing to be changed, and absorbing the cost. It means accompanying one another in the streets, or at the encampment, or at the board meeting, or in our denomination.

¹⁸ Menakem, *My Grandmother's Hands*, 61.

Still, the trauma response is very quick. The impulse to *flee, fold or fight* is so visceral and immediate, we have a hard time even beginning.

There are three practices that are keeping me sane these days and I hope have supported my congregation's work of memory and transformation. First, is the Buddhist practice of *maitri*, meaning *unconditional friendship with self*. Too often in this work of racial justice, I fall prey to shame, guilt and quite frankly just wanting to give up. Sometimes I'm with Butler's college friend, and just wish my generation of white folk would die off. This is a cultural trauma response to white supremacy. Over the course of this past year, I've meditated on befriending myself. Whatever I'm feeling, I endeavor to breathe in the width, depth, and breadth, of that feeling. And as I breathe out, I intone compassion for myself, to bring compassion into the very center of me. I do my best to refrain from denigrating myself, or wishing I was something or somebody else. I sit with what I am and hold loving kindness for that real me. In essence, I'm learning to calm my soul nerve.

This has proved invaluable, not only for my own wellbeing, but the wellbeing of the circles and the churches within the larger church that I lead. Calming my trauma response has meant that I'm less likely to act defensively, or try to manipulate an outcome. The authenticity that I am cultivating within, along with colleagues and cultural leaders is engendering authenticity among. We are working to calm the soul nerve of our church.

Another practice has been to flat out favor voices of color. There may be a million voices going off in my head about how this or that is a mistake, or this or that can't be real, or this or that is not healthy, but I have promised myself to listen for the surplus wisdom inherent at the margins. I listen for "the *real*," rather than the "reality (that which has been pushed below the

surface and repressed in the formation of the dominant version of reality)” that has escaped the control of of the system.¹⁹ I endeavor to calm my soul nerve, my need to “manage” or “assert control” or “be a minister,” and appreciate alternative perspectives, and energies. I find that I do better when I pay attention to the constrictions, the relaxing, the embedded cues of safety or danger in my body. I’m trying to grow up and out of the cultural dynamics of white supremacy, as clumsy as I may be.

Finally, I have a few trusted people to whom I tell the absolute truth, some of whom are in this circle. I don’t try to make myself look better or braver or more compassionate than I am. I weep at the state of things, and the inner state of me. I trust the covenant of love between us, rest for a bit, and then begin again in love. One thing is clear, memory work cannot be done alone. We need each other to stay sane, to remind us who we are, and to whom we belong, because the power of evil is surprising.

I end with a final image that I’m holding onto right now from the whole cloth of memory. It is a miniature 16C ship that hangs from the ceiling of every Danish church.

In the Danish tradition, the ship is meant to symbolize this one unarguable fact: We are all in the boat together. The Danes hang a ship not above the chancel or the pulpit, but over the body of the congregation to remind us all that we are sitting side by side in the boat together. We are meant to put our oars in the water and pull in mutual effort. The storms may be mighty, the waves rough and frighteningly high, but we are meant to navigate this life together.

The ship is also placed above our heads to remind us of another truth: We are not at the helm. This ship we share is guided by the divine, by God, by the Mystery, by the Spirit of Love

¹⁹ Joerg Rieger, *Christ and Empire: From Paul to Postcolonial Times* (Fortress Press, Minneapolis), 2007, Digital.

and Life, by something larger than you or my efforts. It's our work as human beings to pull in rhythm with what is good, just, and grace filled in this world. This is our work. This is what we are meant to do together.

This is some of the wisdom I hold from my new found dialogue with my ancestors.

Fellow travelers, look around, and then row.