

Understanding & Dismantling Privilege

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Reflections: A White Southerner's Story

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Abstract

A reflection on my experience growing up White in the segregated South, my complicity with the virulently racist system, and my developing consciousness of racism and White privilege.

Keywords: Racism; Antiracism; White Privilege; Segregation; Southerner

Pat Aron is a long-time political activist who first became aware of racial injustice as a young white child growing up in the United States' segregated South. There as a teenager her work to confront racism began, an activism that continues today with SURJ/Boston (Showing Up for Racial Justice). Pat is a member of the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom, a founder of Congo Action Now, and a past board member of the Massachusetts Gay and Lesbian Political Caucus. Her interests focus on the U.S. civil rights, feminist, and LGBTQ movements and on efforts to bring peace to the Democratic Republic of Congo (working with the New England Congolese diaspora as well as campus groups). A recently retired public health social worker, Pat has a Master's of Social Work degree from Boston University and is a Licensed Independent Clinical Social Worker.

Introduction

A period of personal contemplation, immediately following my retirement, led to harsh memories that I thought had been lost. This reflective piece emerged from those memories of my early complicity with the oppressive Southern systems of racism and White privilege. I have since been inspired by accounts of others' paths to antiracism activism, such as the personal narratives of activists compiled by Eddie Moore, Marguerite W. Penick-Parks, and Ali Michael (2015). Within another group of leaders in the fight against racism and White privilege, Mark Warren identified moral shocks/outrage as a major motivator toward action (2010). Mab Segrest's fight against the Klan followed her courageous journey through Southern family and culture (1994). I have been powerfully moved by the stories of these dedicated individuals. The paths that lead from complicity to awareness and on to action are many and they are varied. It is my hope that this reflection may contribute to the growing literature that explores these diverse paths to racial justice activism.

There is so much I don't remember.
My life comes back to me in fragments.

The congregation was passionately singing the invitational hymn "Just As I Am" by Charlotte Elliott, as I felt the sadness, a deep sorrow, rising up inside me. I stood, sobbing, at the front of the church.

Just as I am, and waiting not

To rid my soul of one dark blot,

*To Thee whose blood can cleanse
each spot,*

O Lamb of God, I come, I come.
(lines 5-8, p. 227)

I was nine and I was saved. The sorrow inside me overflowed and tears ran down my face as the preacher embraced me. I believed resolutely in everything the preacher said. My soul was in danger of going to hell. Now I had been saved.

I joined the church and was baptized. For the next seven years, Moffett Memorial Baptist Church would be the most important thing in my life. I looked forward to Sunday School and to church services every week, to Vacation Bible School during the summer, and to revivals. I played the piano at church gatherings and once played at a tent revival out in the country. I wanted to be a missionary in Africa.

Even though it's been decades since I've identified theologically with the words, I still can't keep myself from crying whenever I hear that hymn. As I sit here writing, it comes to me that ridding my soul of a deep blot has been a major part of my life's work.

Childhood: Certainty and Confusion

I grew up in southern Virginia in the Bible Belt of the segregated South, the South of the 1950s and 1960s. The first time I remember any consciousness of the racism that permeated my surroundings was on a city bus. I was around eight years old and was seated by myself near the front of the bus. A Black woman with a small child (aged three or four) got on the bus. The woman paid the fare and the little girl

headed toward a front seat. She plopped down, but the woman jerked her up and pulled her toward the back. The girl was protesting and trying to hold her ground. The woman dragged her screaming to the back of the bus. I felt uneasy, like something was wrong. I didn't know what it was—it was long before I knew the concepts of racism and privilege and oppression—but something just didn't seem right.

The signs were ever-present—at restaurants, movie theaters, bathrooms, water fountains, bus stations, everywhere. They said, “Whites Only” or “White” or “Colored.” There was a White high school (George Washington) and a Black high school (John M. Langston). There was a White hospital (Memorial) and a Black hospital (Winslow). I never heard anybody question how things were. It never occurred to me that there might be a different way to see the world or that the world could be different.

My emotional reaction to the racism and injustice came years before I began to develop an intellectual understanding of what was happening around me. I was around ten years old and was sitting in the doctor's waiting room with Mama. I hated accompanying Mama to doctors' appointments, but she was too anxious to go out by herself, so she took me with her. After she went in to see the doctor, I started reading a story in a magazine about two children in a park where they'd come with their families. The girls started playing together. After a while of laughing and playing, they went to join one of the families. The mother wouldn't let them continue playing together. Somehow it was conveyed that one of the children was Black and the other was White. My reaction to the story was visceral. I wasn't sure why, but I really hated the story, even though I didn't

recognize that there was anything wrong with the mother's edict.

I remember very clearly one Halloween evening that left me feeling embarrassed and confused. Daddy was one of the gentlest people I ever knew. He loved children and every year he looked forward to handing out candy at Halloween to the children who came to the door. We were in the living room. Daddy was at the door, speaking more forcefully than in his usual soft voice. I heard him say, “I don't ever want to see you around here again.” He closed the door and walked away. I don't know if I saw the child at the door, but I knew the child was a boy who was Black. A few minutes later, my father walked over to me. His face had a troubled, almost anguished, look. He told me to come with him and bring all the candy. We got in the car and drove up and down the streets looking for the little boy. We didn't find him.

Most of the constant assaults on people of Color never even registered with my child self. I remember as a child seeing two movies in the local theater. One was *The Long, Long Trailer* with Lucille Ball. I remember the end of the trailer hanging off a cliff as Lucy was driving. The other movie was *The Lone Ranger*. I was mesmerized by the Lone Ranger's light blue shirt (on our black and white television it was nondescript). I also remember the “Colored” sign at the stairs directing Black people to the balcony. People could end up in jail if they used the wrong stairs. I never wondered how people of Color felt about the constant threat to their lives.

In the fifth grade, I was proud to get the DAR History Award from the Daughters of the American Revolution. I remember walking to the stage, hoping that one day I

could join the organization that was so esteemed in the South. It would be many years before I would learn of the origins and history of the DAR. In 1939, 20 years before I accepted its award, the organization had banned Marion Anderson from singing in Constitution Hall because she was Black.

Gone with the Wind, Margaret Mitchell's novel about the Civil War that romanticizes the South and slavery, was revered by everyone I knew. I read the book when I was 12. Inspired, I wrote a passionate essay that I called "The South Will Rise Again" about wanting to recapture the glories of the old South. Everyone I knew praised the essay. I thought everybody shared that vision.

When I was growing up, Ross was my best friend. He lived across the street and we played together almost every day until my family lost our house because of financial setbacks and we had to move. We would play in his back yard with other friends, often catching crawfish and tadpoles in the creek. You didn't go too far into the woods behind the house—if you did you might run into the Black people who lived on the other side. Who knew what they would do to you? When we were teenagers, I remember hearing Ross bragging about joining the Ku Klux Klan. I was horrified—that was going too far. Even though I was proud to identify with the South, there were times when even my White, privileged self-felt abhorrence at its depravity.

Sometimes my emotional reaction to racism was one of confusion and self-questioning. Sunday night at 8 o'clock was when *The Ed Sullivan Show* came on. One night, as a young teenager, I was sitting alone in the living room watching a group of Black performers. It was the first time I'd seen the group and I don't remember if it

was the Temptations or the Four Tops (years later, during college, I would see both groups in concert many times). Daddy walked into the room and looked toward the television. I heard him say, "You're always watching them," and then he walked over to the television and turned it off. I knew that he was upset that the people I was watching were Black. I felt like I'd done something wrong.

My parents and I would go to Sunday dinner every week at my grandmother's house out in the country. One Sunday, I heard a comment from my Uncle Bob that startled me. It was before dinner. He was standing in the hallway outside the kitchen. Uncle Bob was married to Mama's sister Lucille. He was different—he was a Methodist and a Republican (before the Southern Democrats turned Republican after the 1964 Civil Rights Act). I don't know whom he was addressing, but I heard him say, "Ain't but one war this country should ever have fought. No man has a right to own another man." I was confused. I'd never heard anyone question slavery or the South's side in the Civil War.

It seemed that almost every family in Danville was connected to either cotton or tobacco. My family's connection was to tobacco. Both my parents grew up on tobacco farms. Many of our relatives still farmed and I spent much of my childhood and adolescence "working in the tobacco." It was there that I first had the opportunity to work alongside people of Color.

The happiest times of my childhood were going to the country—to the county outside town to Aunt Louise's and Uncle Allen's farm. We'd go there almost every weekend. With the women, I'd pick string beans and tomatoes and corn to take home for the week as the men went to the barn to

check on the tobacco. I'd play with my boy cousins. Playing ball, digging foxholes, playing pool on an improvised table, trying to grab a cluster of grapes without getting stung by wasps—I loved it. Sometimes we'd stay late so the men could go gigging for frogs.

Every summer until I left home for college I'd work in the tobacco. While it was the dirtiest work I've ever done, I loved being part of the crew that would hand or tie at the barn or top or sucker (remove side shoots) in the fields. I remember the thrill of the first time I was entrusted with pulling, taking off the delicate bottom leaves one at a time. On the farm, we all worked together—Black and White, side by side—doing the same jobs, breathing the same hot, dusty air. We talked, joked, and took breaks for a soft drink and cheese crackers. I never questioned where the Black people went at lunchtime when all the White people went to my aunts to eat. We could all work together, but we could socialize only during the morning and afternoon breaks.

Adolescence: Awakening

When I was growing up, Danville prided itself on three things. The first was Dan River Mills, the cotton mill that employed much of the town. The second was the tobacco market. Danville called itself the “World’s Best Tobacco Market.” The third was being “The Last Capital of the Confederacy.” The last cabinet meeting of Jefferson Davis’s confederate government was held in the old Sutherlin mansion. The mansion housed the library—a large “Confederate Memorial” sign was overhead with a small “Danville Public Library” plaque on the side.

It was only recently that I learned of another aspect of the town’s reputation

during that time. While reading documents from the Library of Virginia about the civil rights demonstrations, I saw Danville described as “a city deep in Virginia's Black Belt and strong in segregationist sentiment” (The Library of Virginia, 1999).

During the summer of 1963, when I was 15, there were civil rights demonstrations in Danville as there were throughout the South. The main things I knew about the demonstrations were that Black protestors would gather on the court house steps and that the local newspaper had pictures of people being driven down an alley by fire hoses. I didn't find the pictures disturbing, but I remember feeling scared as the school bus drove by the court house. Everyone on the bus was afraid we'd be attacked by the demonstrators. Every day I read the newspaper and yet had no idea of the meaning or extent of the protests. Now I know that that summer hundreds of demonstrators went to jail as part of the Danville Movement. Many were indicted under John Brown's Law that made it illegal to incite "the colored population to acts of violence or war against the white population" (The Library of Virginia, 1999).

My foundation, the most important thing in my life, had been the church. People at Moffett Memorial heard in 1963 that Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was coming to town. At the church, there were meetings and angry discussions over what to do if Dr. King came to our church. Some people wanted to block him at the door. Others had the idea of leading him to the pulpit where people would laugh at him. I don't remember if a plan of action was ever adopted. Dr. King came to Danville that summer, but he didn't come to Moffitt. He instead addressed a large gathering at High Street Baptist, a historic African American

church. People at Moffitt were relieved; still, the congregation split apart over the conflict.

The hatred expressed by church members toward Dr. King bothered me deeply although at that point I still wasn't sure how I felt about the Civil Rights Movement. I remember the editorial in the *Danville Register* saying that Dr. King was a communist. I believed it. However, I also believed strongly that the hatred I saw around me conflicted with the teaching to "Love thy neighbor as thyself." I was shaken by the incongruity. It was so disturbing to me that I stopped going to church.

Within months of the schism in the church, I began to realize that the church's reaction to Dr. King had been racist. I don't remember how this realization came to me, but for the first time in my life I was beginning to see the racism around me. Later that year, when I was 16, I started to support the campaign of an African American woman attorney who was running for Danville City Council. After school, I'd go to the Holiday Inn for meetings about the campaign. I was glad that my parents assumed I was in more traditional after-school activities and hoped they wouldn't discover what I was doing. Even while working for her election, I didn't know that Ruth Harvey was a leading civil rights attorney and that she was in court representing protestors who had been arrested during the demonstrations. By then my world view had changed profoundly. I regretted that I hadn't been there supporting the protestors on the courthouse steps.

The persistent bigotry wasn't solely anti-Black. The day at George Washington High School began each morning with devotions led by students—all of them fundamentalist Christians. I remember that one day the loudspeaker broke because a

boy was so loudly screaming his zealous message into it. Sarah sat in front of me in our alphabetically arranged desks. Sarah was Jewish and was unsettled by the proselytizing fervor. I was also bothered by it and by the daily ritual. I wrote an editorial for the high school paper calling for the devotions to be an interdenominational, inspirational message. The editorial didn't get printed and it was the only time I ever got called to the principal's office. The principal yelled that as long as he was there, George Washington would be a Christian school.

As a child, I had one goal—to go to college. As an adolescent, I added a second goal—to get out of the South. I'd come to abhor the pernicious racism that was everywhere. I had to get away from that oppressive system I'd been part of my whole life. While I couldn't go to college outside the South, I did find a college in the South that had a progressive reputation. The small, central Virginia women's college had led the way in the desegregation of private colleges in the South. Still, it was in the Jim Crow South, as I was soon reminded. I was a waitress in the school dining halls. When we were asked to submit forms with the number of students at each meal, broken down by "White" and "Black," I was outraged. For months, I posted the forms around campus to make people aware of the disgraceful practice. Someone always took them down. Later, I was reprimanded for eating in the kitchen with an African American cook and for trying to go swimming at the school with a friend who is African American. I was shocked when the pool was shut down when we arrived.

One day when I was home from college I sat on Mama's bed. She was sitting at her sewing machine. Mama and I didn't talk much—it was unusual that we were

having a conversation. I can't imagine how I got to the topic, but it was probably related to my Asian history course. I asked, "Do you think you know more than a Confucian scholar in China?" Her response, "I'd like to think I know more than a Chinaman." Her words were emphatic and unselfconscious.

Emerging Activism

It was only after graduating from college and moving north that I formed close and lasting friendships with women and men who are African American. Shortly after my arrival in Boston, I met Lew when I started a weekend job at a substance abuse clinic where he worked. Lew was attempting to document how drugs were being introduced into the community in efforts to control people of Color. He opened my eyes to dimensions of racism that I had never before considered. I began to recognize the institutional, systemic racism that existed even beyond the confines of the South. Lew was recently in town and we got together for dinner. We'd have never guessed, when we were hanging out in our 20s, that 45 years later we'd be discussing end-of-life issues.

Not only did I develop lifelong friendships with people of Color after moving to Boston, it was also there that I met and became close to other White Southern expatriates. In my early 30s, I met JoAnn through the Cambridge Women's Center. I'd never realized how confirming it would feel to connect with another White person who had grown up in the midst of Jim Crow and who had rejected all it represented. JoAnn was also from Virginia—she understood me on a level no one else did. Through her insights and her experiences, JoAnn broadened my understanding of Southern racism. She has devoted her life to challenging White privilege on college campuses. JoAnn

unceasingly supported my developing activism. She is still my best friend.

Over the decades I've joined in or organized dozens of demonstrations, protests, marches, rallies, stand-outs, and events. It's only now as I look back over my life that I wonder why I've felt compelled to march and to protest. My first march was as a college student, walking through the streets of Lynchburg to protest the Vietnam War. People along the route threw water bombs. I was never sure if they were targeting us because we were protesting the war or because we were a racially mixed group. The week before graduation, I went to Washington, D.C. to work with the Vietnam Moratorium. The Moratorium's antiwar rally was the largest demonstration ever to have taken place in the city. I vividly remember running to try to get away from the tear gas.

Had the religious passion I felt as a child transformed into an awareness of injustices so oppressive that they demanded action? After moving to Boston, I met many committed activists who heightened my awareness. I frequently participated in actions organized by the Cambridge Women's Center, often focused on ending violence against women. We walked in Take Back the Night marches. We supported African American women as they made public the epidemic of murders of women of Color in Roxbury. I joined other social workers in New York City for a massive antinuke demonstration; Central Park overflowed with protesters. I marched in Gay Pride parades and organized LGBTQ volunteers to support progressive candidates. I no longer felt certain that my religious beliefs would determine my eternal life but I did feel propelled on a spiritual level toward social action.

Connections to my childhood dreams come back to me in unexpected ways. For the past eight years, my major political work has been to support the people of the Democratic Republic of Congo in ending the war and the resulting sexual violence in their country. As a child, I had wanted to be a missionary in Africa. Africa, in my child's mind, had been the Congo. I never imagined that one day I would be speaking on campuses, standing in vigils, and lobbying legislators with members of the New England Congolese community. I feel blessed that my Congolese friends have given me a deep appreciation of their culture and that my life is no longer determined by the condescending arrogance of childhood.

There has been so much pain and so much outrage. Slavery. Murder. Lynching. Jim Crow. There have been so many martyrs to honor. Lamar Smith. Emmett Till. Herbert Lee. Johnnie Mae Chappell. James Chaney. Andrew Goodman, Michael Schwerner. Jimmy Lee Jackson. Reverend James Reeb. Medgar Evers. Addie Mae Collins. Denise McNair. Carole Robertson. Cynthia Wesley. Viola Liuzzo. Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr. Malcolm X. So many other souls lost to us.

Recently I stood with hundreds of other angry, frustrated protestors with Black Lives Matter and Mass Action Against Police Violence signs in front of the Boston police headquarters. It was yet another demonstration protesting the killing of African Americans, mostly young men, by the police. This nation is only now beginning to recognize the frequency of horrifying murders perpetrated by and allowed by its criminal justice system. Sean Bell. Trayvon Martin. Jordan Davis. Renisha McBride. Michael Brown. Eric Garner. Laquan McDonald. Tamir Rice. Freddie Gray. Walter Scott. Sandra Bland. Eric

Harris. Philando Castile. Walter Scott. Alton Sterling. Terence Crutcher. Deborah Danner. These spirits and so many others gone. How do we, as individuals and as a nation, rid our souls of this deep blot, this original sin of racism?

Evolving Identity

For decades, I hid the fact that I was a Southerner (except from a few like-minded expatriates). I never volunteered to anyone that I was from the South and if asked directly where I was from I answered "Virginia" (hoping they'd think of the D.C. suburbs and not the Southside). I worked hard to change my accent. Once I was home from college and went to see Dr. Arey, our family doctor. I remember him remarking, "You've lost your accent. That's a shame—it was so sweet."

The first time I heard Meg Christian's song "Southern Home," I was sure that I could have written it if I knew how to write songs.

I was travelling around with some friends from the South

Who'd all moved away soon as we could get out,

Fleeing Confederate closets of pain,

Losing the accents we'd come to disdain. (pp. 1-4)

Another line of Meg's song recently came to mind. It was 2:30 a.m. the morning after the 2016 presidential election. The newscaster was trying to dispassionately report that the candidate who enthusiastically espoused racism, sexism, xenophobia, and myriad other hatreds was going to win. I sat stunned before the

television, unsettled, sad, and scared. It wasn't just the South.

My southern home, no longer to blame for the pain that I could have found anywhere. (p. 11)

I'd never quite believed that line. While the song may be interpreted many ways, to me it was about racism. I'd felt that that, overt, pervasive expression of racism—Jim Crow—could have been produced only within the specific historical, economic, and religious context of the South. Yet, in copious forms, racism permeates our national character, as the results of the election make undeniably clear.

I am a woman, a feminist, a lesbian, and a political activist. For most of my life I have worked for peace and social justice, supporting antiwar, feminist, antiracist, LGBTQ, disability rights, and various other movements. Yet nothing is more seared into my core, into my soul, than the urgency of eradicating the deep blot of racism.

When friends ask how the way I think about the world has changed, I never know quite how to answer. I know that the fundamental shift in my world view happened when I was in high school. It was before I left for college and began to meet people from outside the South, from places where a raging racism had not been part of their lives since birth. I watched national events on the nightly news and saw children, women, and men who were peacefully protesting segregation being mauled by dogs and beaten with billy clubs. I listened to the words of Dr. King and at some point, began to hear them differently, not as an attack on our Southern way of life, but as a call for morality and justice. I heard the speeches of President John F. Kennedy. The words of these two men showed me a way of seeing

the world I'd never imagined. I was learning a different way of thinking and of being. The church's teaching to "Love thy neighbor as thyself" also affected me deeply. The meaning of those words seemed clear and I took them seriously.

Later, after I had left the South and long after the influence of *Gone with the Wind*, there were many distinctive voices that inspired me and expanded my world view. Barbara Jordan, Nelson Mandela, Gloria Steinem, Shirley Chisholm, Holly Near, the Combahee River Collective—these and numerous other visionary individuals had a major impact on my understanding of racism and other oppressions. Books and study groups further shaped my developing consciousness. I first read Adrienne Rich's (1976) *Of Woman Born* in a study group a few years after moving to Boston. Her insights strengthened my developing feminist perspective. Many years later, Michelle Alexander's (2012) *The New Jim Crow*, also read in a study group, opened my eyes to the horrors of the criminal justice system and gave me a much deeper understanding of structural racism.

It was only a few years ago that I became aware of the vibrant, White antiracist movement that exists across the South. White Southerners who are immersed in this struggle—devoted women and men, along with organizations as varied as the Highlander Research and Education Center and the Southern Poverty Law Center—have done pioneering work to fight racism and White privilege. I have much more to learn about the critical work of these leaders in the struggle.

Consciousness of Privilege

Recently I remembered another study group I joined in the early 1980s—

White Women Fighting Racism. Over the months we met, there was no mention of White privilege. How could we, even back then, have been oblivious to our own ever-present privilege and to the ubiquitous White privilege that surrounded us?

My consciousness of White privilege has developed sporadically. In the South, I had viewed the raging racism around me as an aberration from the nation's essence. In coming north, I felt I had arrived at a state of enlightenment (Massachusetts) where any racism that existed was individual. I didn't recognize that racism was embedded, as in the South, in every social structure—governmental, legal, economic, educational, healthcare—everything.

In the South I knew, there was no distinction between racism, White supremacy, and White privilege. It is possible to theoretically separate them, but it was together that they were manifested in the oppressive systems of Jim Crow. When, a few years ago, I first became aware of the concept of White privilege, I thought of it as a northern phenomenon that was insignificant compared to the South's overt racism. I didn't think that White privilege existed in the South of my youth—but, of course, it was there as it was everywhere. It was the underpinning that made a virulent racism inevitable, given the South's singular history. It was always there, since the first European set foot on the continent.

The South's White privilege wasn't subtle. It wasn't something that could be identified only through thoughtful analysis. It was blatant and it was celebrated. The privilege was ever-present—riding a bus, watching a movie, working on a farm, going swimming—and so ingrained that it was indecipherable to those who benefitted from it.

In the fall of 2016, the White Privilege Conference held at Lesley University introduced me to a community of White, antiracist activists who further expanded my awareness of the omnipresence of White privilege. I am still awakening to its reality, to its insidiousness and its power. It is a deliberate, continuous awakening through layer after layer of consciousness—and still there is more to excavate.

There have been changes in Danville. Tobacco and textiles no longer dominate the city. The tobacco markets closed and the auctions ended years ago. The cotton mills are gone—after a steady decline, Dan River closed down. A new library was built—the Sutherlin mansion now houses a fine arts and history museum. There are no more signs—the “White” and “Colored” postings are gone. The newly elected vice-mayor is an African American man.

Moffett Memorial was hit by lightning and destroyed by a fire in 1971. In the rebuilt sanctuary, the heavy, dark wood was replaced by a light, open look. Although its membership continues to be almost completely White, the church now works in alliance with neighboring African American churches. Its mission focuses on community service rather than eternal damnation. Some of the children I knew in Sunday School are now leaders in the church. In 1995, the Southern Baptist Convention finally apologized for its support of slavery and segregation.

I no longer hide the fact that I'm from the South. Hints of my accent have returned. The South is part of me and will always be. I can now embrace parts of it, its

beauty and its gentle cadence. I may never completely obliterate the racism inside me that was created there, but it must be my life's mission to try.

Hundreds of faith leaders fill the steps of the Massachusetts State House at the Moral Monday rally. Speakers invoke Dr. King's call at the Riverside Church in 1967 for a "radical revolution of values" (as cited in Washington, 1986) with passionate testimonies, stories of injustice and of struggle—struggle against racism, poverty, mass incarceration, anti-immigrant bigotry, environmental destruction, war, and myriad other forms of hatred and exploitation. The call and response lifts up our cry for justice. Litany (2016) chants:

*We cannot accept the way things are
because we have been given a moral
vision of how things ought to be.*

*We are here to summon the better
angels of our nature and press
together toward higher ground.*
(lines 51–54, p. 2)

So much pain, so much injustice. I feel the sadness, a deep sorrow, rising inside me. As the tears come, I feel the presence of the community around me. We press together toward higher ground.

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