Resilience

I come from a line of extraordinary people—a mother who waited tables while dreaming of being the first person in our family to go to college, a grandmother who raised an entire community of little ones in poverty and hope, and a great-grandmother who wore only the dresses she sewed. My father worked long hours in the textile mills until chemicals and exploited labor disabled his body. The weariness of racism, past due bills, and being sick and tired never showed on their stern, proud faces. Sometimes I heard it at night when the whole nest was quiet except for a single sniffle quickly followed by three more. The courage, strength, and resilience of Black people have been whispered about behind closed doors, caricatured in pop culture media, and sometimes belted out in a soulful tune. Black people have been at the forefront of major social and political movements all over the world. Our warrior foremothers like Queen Nzinga Mbande and Yaa Asantewaa fearlessly defended their homelands against European colonial armies. The skillful tactics of Harriet Tubman led hundreds of our people to freedom. In 1963, Mrs. Fannie Lou Hamer was jailed and beaten for organizing sit-ins and encouraging people to vote. Winnie Mandela lost everything in the fight against apartheid—her land, her home, her husband, her freedom, her health, her life. The price tag for asserting our humanity has certainly been high but never beyond our means. Freedom was not handed to us by benevolent people or institutions. It was born of struggle and secured with the blood, sweat, and tears of our mothers and grandmothers, our fathers and our brothers. The life force in us won't let us quit.

Much like the characters in Jesmyn Ward's novels, we are complex people molded from myriad experiences. We have suffered and sacrificed, but we have also triumphed and thrived. We have made life better for everyone around us through our work and care, our smiles, and our sweet potato pies. We fight hard, but we love harder. Sometimes we cry.

We are fortunate to have such incredibly talented authors and artists carrying forward the tradition of using art and thought to interrogate and transform lives. Ward's short stories examine the nooks and crannies of our existence, simultaneously exposing painful sores and deep wounds while inviting us to celebrate all of life's victories, great and small. Particularly interesting is how she centers the experiences of our youth. Our children are playing hopscotch on school-to prison pipelines. They witness their friends and peers deaths by the gun-wielding hands of police for even the mildest infractions, criminalized and harassed while bird watching in a public park. The vibrant confidence radiating from youth-led movements is inspiring and reminds me of how much they contribute to our progress. Kwame Ture was 19 years old when he helped organize Baltimore and Mississippi Freedom rides. Fred Hampton was 18 when he became an internationally recognized leader in the Black Panther Party and just 21 years old when he was assassinated by Chicago police in concert with the FBI.

The ebb and flow of self-determination, liberation, and transcendence is like a kaleidoscope reflecting creativity, passion, and lots of hope-filled Sunday mornings. Church hats swaying in unison echo voices from the streets demanding respect, dignity, and room to breathe. We are constantly struggling for the right to define ourselves and our destinies in whatever way we choose. Our thoughts and ideas matter. Our imaginations and intellect matter. Our dreams and

aspirations matter. Black Lives Matter. Black lives matter when we sit in classrooms that only acknowledge us in February. Black lives matter when we are sentenced to 20 years in prison for being addicts. Black lives matter when we are in churches that don't recognize the ways in which western religions have been complicit in colonizing and controlling our souls. Black lives matter when we die disproportionately during a pandemic. Black lives matter when we can't afford to eat, can't find a place to live and sleep, or can't drive our cars on Martin Luther King, Jr. Highway without wondering if we'll make it home to our families. Black lives matter when we're at our best, and they matter when we're at our worst.

I love and honor our leadership, our grit, and our commitment to better futures. I celebrate our compassion, our ingenuity, and our wisdom. We have so much work to do, but there is no doubt that we can. Every day is a chance to begin again. Let the circle be unbroken.