

Pills and Potions

*Sex, Pleasure, Substance Use,
...And Other Things I
Wish The Black Church & Family Told Me*



Personal Essays

Acknowledgements

I wish to acknowledge the invaluable help, support, and agape love from each of the women who accompany me on my life and healing journey- my Mom, my Aunt Kimmie, and last but not least...my Nana. Thank you for your patience, wisdom, and insight. I know that reading the following essays won't be easy, but as you all have always taught me...nothing in life ever is. And I didn't write them to be. Nonetheless, I owe you all for planting me. And sure, there are seeds I'll never understand. Roots that'll never disappear. But, you all never...ever stopped watering me. So, thank you for helping me grow. Thank you for being with me in a space now, where we are continuously making room- for openness, for dialogue, for healing, and for blooming....into the women we're meant to be. I love you.

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Introduction

“Genesis! Exodus! Leviticus!...Numbers!”

It was New Years Eve when my friends and I were gathered in the confines of an apartment living room, drunkenly singing the “Bible Song”- a song we learned ages ago in Children’s Church. This was only moments after attending “Night Watch” service at the church we all grew up in...and running into one of our fellow (adult) members right after service, as we stocked up on our libations for the evening. As food went into our stomachs and alcohol went down our throats, our spirits were lifted as we brought in...2019.

I have very fond memories like the aforementioned when I think of my upbringing with my grandparents and my adjacent life in the (black) Baptist and AME Zion church. Outside of school, my church was my playground. I made lifelong friends, lifelong memories, and a lifelong belief that somehow God loved me... that I was favored...and that no matter how far I stray...there’s always hope for me. Whether I was in church, in choir practice or ushering....or begging my grandmother to go home after the day long services at her home church in the South Carolina country, my church life offered me something then I wanted so desperately...but already had- a family.

My actual family story begins on a hot, summer day at the moment my mother was unaware her water had broken. Scheduled for a routine appointment, she sat across from her OB just to learn I was already coming. My grandmother grabbed one leg, my aunt grabbed the other...and in three pushes...as the Summer Olympics torch was being passed through the city of Columbia, South Carolina...at exactly 8:19pm on June 25th, 1996...I was here. One for the Father. One for the Son. One for the Holy Spirit.

As my mother laid on her back during her delivery...a 21-year old college student trying to figure out life in her 20’s, what in the hell was she going to do with a baby? She was going to do what was best for me...that’s what. So, she eventually agreed that my grandparents would raise me- “Nana and Papa”, as I call them- and nothing was ever the same.

With my grandparents, I grew up in a predominantly black community, shuffled through predominantly black schools, and navigated a lot of predominantly black things. Life provided by them afforded a number of opportunities that did not exist for my peers who had to choose between an education and gang-bangin’. While some were just simply trying to make it...step up at home...get free meals...take care of younger siblings...I was at Girl Scouts, piano lessons, swim meets, white-washed summer camps, or karate. My grandparents sacrificed for my childhood...and gave love and comfort to me...the best way they could.

I wouldn’t be where I am without them. I wouldn’t know who I am without my family. I wouldn’t know whose I am without my spirituality, influenced my grandmother’s upbringing.

So, it’s best to begin by stating...I did not write the following essays as an attack to those near to me...or to bash the black church...or admonish my upbringing. In fact, I wouldn’t trade either for the world. Because it molded me...ordered my steps....built me differently...liberated me into my own freedom to pursue what kind of woman I want to be. I do, however, hope my words ignite a call to action for more open conversations.

While I value the warmth, security, and village provided to me by church and family, it'd be remiss of me to say everything was and is perfect. Nothing is. And here I am, a grown-ass woman, dissecting where imperfection got the best of me. Got the best of us. And where things could've been different.

Where there could've been space...

Where words could've been said...

Where secrets could've been shared...

Where I could've said "No"...

But, my past has gone. Never to be re-visited, re-done, or re-written. My future, however? Well, here we are...writing. Writing with transformation. Writing with my dreams. Writing with hope. Writing...with healing.

What are we transforming? What are we healing?

The black community. The black family. The black church...and all the other black things in between that tell us to "Stop acting white"...."Stop eating"..."Stop acting fast".... "Stop talking back to me"...and "Don't have sex too early".

I could wish for no more devotion and loyalty from my church and my family...but sometimes...I do wish I had just a little more direction, room to speak, and non-judgmental communication.

So this is what I wish I knew then, and this...is what grinds my gears now.

Sex & Pleasure

“I still love, I still love, I still love, I still love...I still lo-o-ove”

---Nicki Minaj

“Don’t have sex...because you will get pregnant and die. Don’t have sex in the missionary position. Don’t have sex standing up. Just don’t do it, OK? Promise?” Ok, now everybody sit back...listen up....and grab some wine. As I reflect on the words of Coach Carr, from the 2004 flick “Mean Girls”, I know that as the good book says- “As for me and my house”...this shit held true. Currently, I’m a 24-year old black woman who still attends and worships at the black church, whose long history is a collective struggle riddled with constant, overt racism, oppression, misogyny, and patriarchy (Maffly-Kipp). Now, before we get started... let's discuss what I’m not doing. I’m not here to preach, list reasons we should leave the church, or exegete a religious text. I am here, however, to do what I do best- tell my story. And I take pride in story-telling, because while my words may be entertaining to some...my stories mean more to me. They bring healing, confidence, strength, and vulnerability- all things I can do in person, but you may not get when I’m on the floor of my shower crying, and wondering “Why the fuck is God playing with me?” Additionally, I am also here to challenge what can and should be different in two of our blackest safe havens.

In my current position in life, I’m responsible for a lot of things- figuring out adulthood, shattering my life, picking up the pieces, holding them together, picking them up again when I can’t, doing my best to not be selfish...and helping to hold down my family. But my biggest responsibility of them all? It’s staying true to me. While staying true to me teaches me much about my path to higher self-worth and self-love, it also highlights the areas in my life where I struggled...where I hurt...where I was silent...and where I wanted so desperately to be saved, caught, taught, protected, and/or seen by two entities I spent the most time with- my church and my family. During the past year, I’ve learned more about these struggles, interacting with them, providing comfort to them, and advocating for their healing. So, lean in...and come heal with me.

Take a deep breath and breathe it out. Because we about to go deep sea diving in this thing y’all, in ways only a man that can REACH can (there’s your trigger warning).

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Maybe I have always had certain curiosities about my body and sex. Or else why would my earliest encounter date back to pre-school? A series of events occurred early, with very little detailed or positive explanations about sex or my body, from my church or my family. I do remember, however, commandeering statements about the ways I shouldn’t be touched, the frequent diatribes about my mother not finishing college after having me early...being told my biological father left a check on the day I was born...and this early, inherent, inward responsibility to rise above both of those odds and be nothing like my mother who contemplated having an abortion with me and my father who’s left me on my therapist couch crying about my sense of abandonment issues. I suppose other important topics like pleasure, consent, and agency were for me to figure out along the way...because from a young age, sex only meant two things- 1) if I had it...I’d get pregnant... and 2) if I got pregnant, I’d be the next family disappointment. Anything in between to avoid that, is worth happening. Right?

Wrong.

There weren't enough open spaces to discuss the right or wrong reasons for having sex besides it being an act of "sinning" and that it shouldn't be done early or with "just anybody". While I heard these things, I still learned on my own that it wasn't a coping mechanism...it wasn't a potion...it wasn't something to do so someone would "like" or "love" me (those damn daddy issues). I damn sure didn't think about the consequences of being exposed to it too early.

And then...

There was "House." Now, if you aren't familiar with House. It's a fairly common game children may play. Girls may pretend to cook or clean in similar ways modeled to them by a maternal figure. And little boys may....well, I'm not sure what boys are supposed to do. The point is...House is supposed to be a normal game. It's normal, until it's not. It's fun...until it's not.

And it wasn't for me....as (I've now learned) for a lot of my brown peers either, who silently played with siblings, cousins, friends,;etc....not understanding the true dangers of House until after...when it's time to rebuild our own internal homes.

I believe the six year old I was then just thought I was having "fun" and obliging the person "playing" with me, so he'd like me...and accept me...and be nice to me. The 24-year old I am now....knows it was sexual abuse. Sexual hurt. Inappropriate sexual behavior for children. Somewhere between my early, inappropriate encounters and engaging in sexual activity as a woman, I stumbled upon shame, guilt, and anxiety. I walked off a path...far off from the girl that had dreams of her wedding night being "special". And I was traveling a road that I'm not even sure was less taken, filled with disgust and isolation. It's a road many take filled with shame, as a result of our family and church's effort or lack thereof in addressing sex positivity and pleasure.

My interest in writing these essays took place the moment I began dissecting my own relationship to sex, my previous encounters, my trauma, and why I couldn't get past them. Maybe because I never talked about it. But also maybe...just maybe... because no one...really wanted to "talk" (or felt comfortable talking) to me about the productive rewards of sex and intimacy.

Writing has been a part of my life forever, so it should come as no surprise that I confessed my childhood abuse to my grandmother, through writing. I remember her reaction like it was yesterday. I was in another room while she made a phone call and stuck up for me....and then it was done, handled, over. BAM. Then, the problem disappeared. At least it was supposed to. At least that's what I think me and Nana thought....that it'd just dissolve and fade away-just like the words of comfort, advice, wisdom, and/or encouragement I now wish she'd given me. Years later, most recently, after thinking we'd just never mention it again...my Nana mentioned it briefly. Not directly. But still...it was there. Lingering. Waving at me. Like my own reflection staring back at me...and finally...so was some of my healing.

What do you say to a child after they've been exposed to sex, sexual images, or inappropriate sexual contact, early? It's a question I don't have the complete answer to. But, I do know...as I'm going through my own journey of discovery....I'm learning we shouldn't have to feel like strangers to the words "consent", "sex", "pleasure", "trauma", "therapy", or "orgasm". Most importantly, I know we shouldn't remain silent. Silence is a normalized disease in our black communities where sexual abuse (even among children) is rampant. And sexual abuse? Sexual abuse is an equal opportunity disease, virus, plague, or for the sake of COVID-19 currently....a fucking pandemic. Sexual hurt and pain knows no color, race, ethnicity, dress size, yearly salary, zip code, age, or disability. From Harvey Weinstein, Matt Lauer, Bill Cosby, and R.Kelly...we've seen through the #MeToo movement alone, just how pervasive sexual violence is (Mansfield).

But...

How can we make more room in our communities? In our families? To speak up...to ask questions...to state what is and what isn't "okay" sexual behavior...especially as children. What have we done to address early sex/pleasure conversations, besides believe it's too early for our children to know anything? What have we done to implement sexual health programming in churches besides stating "Sex (and abortion) is a sin" and ignoring that people (especially teens) have it? As a result, instead of creating a spiritual "hospital" filled with love, patience, forgiveness, and the many other qualities the Southern Black church strives to preach and influence from Jesus Christ...we create spiritual prisons for our youth and our women, filled with sexual shame, depression, and isolation.

The facts show ages 12 to 14 are the PEAK ages for adolescents to engage in sexual behaviors. This accounts for a lot of changes as a result of puberty, but it doesn't account for the fact that sexual or "sexualized" behavior is a normal part of development, occurring as early as two years of age (Kellogg). In fact, as the world keeps changing, it is common for children to have questions and knowledge relating to body parts, pregnancy, birth, exploring their genitals, and pleasure as early as five years old. It is also common for children to play...and take on roles (ie. House)...and be curious. It is not common, however, for children to prey on each other, older children to force/manipulate significantly younger children, or "act out" in public (Brown).

To all the aforementioned points...it is also not common that our black families or church be used as a source of sexual information or shared decision making (Williams). If I could have one wish like Ray-J, for the collective black church and family, I'd wish for more strength to have tougher, trauma-informed conversations rather than the silent treatment and "holier than thou" respectability tactics that leave children lost, "fast in the ass" girls left out, and young, black women even more scattered.

I hope you took ya first sip of that wine.

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*"Ayo, they could never make me hate you;
Even though what you was doin' wasn't tasteful"*

---Nicki Minaj

Each year, an estimated 90,000 children are traumatized by and become survivors of child sexual abuse. While many may suffer at the hands of an uncle, a step-parent, a step-sibling, members of a foster home, other familial ties, or members of their community...some are preyed upon at the very place we're told to run to...the place where God is supposed to be...a place of safety. And if God can't help them...who can they run to?

The black church is a major institution and stakeholder in the black community, bolstering a symbol of support, hope, and peace. However, it must fall to scrutiny for its failure to protect and educate children about sexual abuse. While abuse in the church is not my truth, nor my story...I do remember the lack of conversations around sexual abuse. Most importantly, I remember what I saw growing up...what a lot of us see. It was men who were always around children. It was utter silence that seemed to wreck havoc in the congregation. It was everyone...turning their eyes and by way of silence and wanting to believe the good...actively participating.

In my line of professional work, I'd like to believe to see the good in people, too...that people can change if (and only if) they want to...that my spiritual beliefs no doubt imbues a hope for redemption...and forgiveness...and mercy....for everyone.

But...

Even God believes in accountability, because that's what we want for survivors, right? So, just as iron sharpens iron (Proverbs 27:17), I'ma sharpen this. There is something especially disgusting, atrocious, and trifling when sexual violence is committed within the Church. Thus, there is a crucial and desperate need for holding perpetrators accountable (and then let's talk about forgiveness later). After all, how could something happen in the one place where we foot-stomp, church-clap, sing, praise dance, shake those loud ass tambourines, and pronounce our bodies as temples? The church, the temple itself, carrying the cross of Christ...also carries a history of misogyny, patriarchy, sexual perversions, and an overall lack of sexual discourse. Despite all my God stands for, the church at large is loud during the call to offering, yet seems to stand for silence with sex, trauma, and sexual violence. Why?

When will carry one another's burdens (Galatians 6:1-5)?

Unfortunately, we've reached a climax-like that point of no return during sex. But, there's no time to tap out here. We need to tap into Sherry Johnson, the Tampa (FL) woman forced to marry her rapist at 11 years old...or Pastor Michael Clare who admitted to raping two teen girls in 2014...or former Pastor Glen Collins who was charged with at least 128 counts of child sex abuse in 2018...or the Ohio church leader, Arthur Dade, Jr. (aka Apostle Dade), convicted of raping a 10-year old boy...or the volunteer "childcare" chaperone at a (non-black) church in my own state, charged with 14 child sex abuse charges (and still in counting), in 2019 (Mama Black).

These are only the names and stories we know. These are not accounting for silent suffering in our own flocks.

A staple in our community dating back to slavery, the black church has been and remains a catalyst in some of our biggest social justice accomplishments.

But...

Why does it still lag behind in its efforts to address and educate about the ending of sex abuse and violence in our own communities? Are we building believers for the Heavenly Kingdom? Or enabling predators in a 21st Century Sodom? Why do we protect those who do not practice what they preach? Why do we let them lead us....while they prey upon our babies?

There is an urgency to eradicate this malicious and un-Godlike behavior in our congregations. So, I am proposing with love...that it is time to do something without waiting on the Lord...and waiting on survivors to speak out. We do not get to sit on our asses, just because survivors are not "reporting". In my opinion, it is less about expecting survivors to do the heavy lifting and more about coming together to enact systemic change for the greater good. Even for the names we do not know or the violence we do not see...there is still an ethical responsibility for the black church to address not only what happens across the world in our communities, but what happens within. There is room before we broach heaven's gates-room for discussion, room for community events, room for creating safety and healing. It is not our jobs to cross boundaries and expect survivors to be "strong" and speak up...or be unbreakable in order for us to take action. They are all those things...

But...

They are also human beings, and placing expectations for how and what terms survivors speak out would be intimidating, exhausting, problematic, unrealistic and downright...messy. Survivors are not our experts, our teachers, or our witnesses to point fingers or publicly condemn anyone (Rothstein). Their healing is at their own will, their own pace, and a part of their own story (See the Crime Victims Right Act). I'll argue though...that survivors are simply are our *David's*. So, we must be their *Abishai's*...and fight for them.

Let's agree to call out our individual and collective congregational bullshit and make a rarely discussed topic, a wildly discussed issue...for the black girl that was raped this week...and all the other brown boys raped today, yesterday, and the day before- as said perfectly by the Children of Combahee (an organization that mobilizes against child sexual abuse in Black church communities using womanist pastoral and theological methods).

#ThemToo.

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"I'm angry, but I still love you"

---Nicki Minaj

If you would've told me I'd be having sex for the first time in a dorm room, I would've laughed and called you a muthafuckin' lie. But, long and behold, there I was, laying there, barely wanting to...but I did.

Like a number of women, I complied because I thought my partner loved me...or rather I thought he'd love me more. There's not a potion strong enough in the world now to get me high off that bullshit.

Before that night, I danced around sex. I went to first base (whatever the hell that is), maybe to second (whatever the hell that is), but I never got a home run. Raised by my grandmother, I decided I had to be a "good" girl...until I wasn't. Until I was doing everything in that dorm room, in my car, in a hotel room, in an apartment. Eve wasn't the only one tempted by the taste of forbidden fruit. I flirted with that damn apple throughout college, up until that big moment.

It doesn't take a rocket scientist to conclude my sexuality was not healthy growing up. In fact, I'm having to spend time now repairing, rebuilding, and evaluating the reasons for my previous "purity" and the ethics taught within most black churches, families, and communities. Some of us do not grow up around wholesome conversations around sex and faith. Our congregation, youth workshops/panels, and Sunday School classes did not discuss holistic sexuality or the possibility of loving God and sex too (Reverend Lacette Cross). Or loving God...and giving consent to sexual intimacy. Or loving God and trying to give up sex...Or loving God and struggling with masturbation and/or pornography (we'll discuss this later). You'd think since research proves that most teens, women, and singles have sex anyway, these would be areas of priority...but, just like addressing the needs of and welcoming invitation to the LGBTQ+ community, they weren't. Outside of church, Nana pretty much told me, and I quote, she "...wasn't taking care of no babies."

That was it.

My black family built negative sex messaging mostly around pregnancy and being "good" and "classy". My black church built messaging around abstaining. Inherently, the combination of both built these messages, that said: "Sex is bad", "Having sex makes you dirty", "Sex won't get you into heaven", and "You've got to wait on the Lord....and the man you need to have sex with". It was not supportive, nor was it nourishing. So, when I started having sex...I started lying to my family. I started emotionally detaching from the church...out of guilt and shame, out of fear I was going to hell...and hoping the blood of First Sunday communion would cleanse the....you know what, never mind. I already felt bad that my flesh was weak. I felt worse when I didn't choose to stop, despite how bad I was allowing my partner to treat me.

But...

(While I'm sure this was not the intention) I felt even worse while reading Megan Good and Devon Franklin's "The Wait." *The Wait*, according to Devon and Megan, reminds us we have the power of choice. The choice to live a life that guarantees we receive God's very best (Franklin). While this opened my eyes to the fact that I wasn't in a relationship God would have me in, I also couldn't help but wonder....even after I decide to do things differently...and do what's best for me...what "doom" really awaits me in my next relationship if I don't wait until I'm married? If it is a healthy, loving, respectful, and long-lasting relationship....does it mean we're hell-bound or no longer built to last in a marriage, if we share our love between the sheets? And most importantly, I needed an answer to the one question I asked out loud during an evening, College Student Bible Study- *What if I wait until we're married, and the dick is not good?!*

Fair enough.

The truth is...at the time, I liked having sex. And if I didn't like it, well I damn sure was using it as a coping mechanism to like myself. If I was having sex, that meant attractive men were attracted to me...and if men were attracted to me...that meant I was pretty. And if I was pretty...well shiiiiiiiiit, I could do anything. Right? Beyonce could've screamed "Pretty Hurts" to me, and I still wouldn't have listened.

In efforts to feel better about having sex, I hid behind a feminist mask, advocating for my autonomy... and said it was my body...I could do whatever I want with it. Not even that mask could hide how I truly felt, the truth that I still had no sexual agency, and that my sexual power was not in my hands. I'd make posts, read books, and share articles about all the wonderful things and happenings about embracing the female sexuality...just to cover up the truth. My truth was....I had a scarlet letter engraved with sexual shame. But who could I tell?

Having sex with just one person wasn't "bad", but when I had sex with another person, who I had not even the slightest "connection" that I desired the most... the light bulb went off, and I realized my problem. In addition to learning I was not built for the "down to fuck" (DTF) culture today, I discovered a yearning...a need, rather, for a reset. But, once again...where would I go? Stepping into church felt like I'd damn near combust into flames. Looking at my family felt like immediate disappointment. I was wracking my brain with who was going to figure me out? Who was gonna slut-shame me? Who was gonna find out I was creeping outside at two in the morning, when, according to one of my friends' Mom...."the only thing open at that hour is McDonalds and legs"?

Most importantly, I was laying beside these people seeking company...yet, felt so lonely. I allowed myself to stay for the sake of just being able to have sex and being wanted. But, when was I going to learn to want me? And how?

I'll tell you how.

Counseling.

Therapy offered me a room and words that my family and church didn't...and a space to deconstruct. To unravel my beliefs on sex, attachment, relationships, and love. Most importantly, I began tearing down all those nasty messages and pointing out...Who told me that? What was their benefit in telling me that? Why was I told to wait to have sex? Why the fuck do I feel bad that I don't want to? What does this all mean for me now? To answer some of those questions as I continue to discover the answers to the others...well, you know why we're here...and you know why I'm writing. Because my church and family told me...and tell us a lot of things...And maybe, just maybe, it was coming from a good place...Ideally, parents and other people who care about us want the best for us. I know my grandparents did. And so did my mom. And so did my aunts. And so did my cousins. And so did everyone else up under the sun.

Perhaps, they wanted to protect my "innocence". They may have also wanted to prevent me from making the same mistakes they once made. Our loved ones may cling to hope that we may be the ones to break free from cycles of lust, abuse, shame, addiction, or infidelity. And we can. We will. But maybe...just maybe... instead of focusing on commands...instead of shame...instead of placing an iron fist on when and the right time to have sex...and keeping a low body count...and not giving it up too early...there needed to be a little more listening....a little more empathy...a little more quality time...so I could properly ask, "So, if a boy masturbates and has cum on his fingers before he fingers me...will I get pregnant?" (Another story for another time).

I think my family wanted me to do well...wants me to do well...wants me to be confident in my relationships...and to not go looking for love in the wrong places. I think the vernacular was just absent to aid in how to navigate my life's Siri. If only Dr. Seuss knew the places I've gone. I've fallen in all those traps. I think they gave me what they could though...what they knew....in their hearts, in their souls, and in the compartments of their minds from their own upbringing...and I am grateful.

But...

...they didn't make any room to learn from me...nor any room for my curiosity about pleasure. And it's quite common in black families- not allowing children to question anything...to talk back...to express their own desires and curiosities...or say "No". Maybe that contributes to so much sexual compliance in women low in sexual assertiveness, in sex/hookup culture (Brown).

At the very least, it contributed to mine.

"So therefore, if your mama told you, 'don't say this, don't do this, don't wear that,' it wasn't just because she wanted to make sure that you stayed chaste and pure until you were married. It was also a matter of life or death. It was also a matter of a violation that nobody could protect from you."

-Reverend Lacette Cross
Restoration Fellowship
Richmond, VA

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"Pills and potions... We're overdosin"

---Nicki Minaj

Remember that "fingering" question? Well, I told you it was another story for another time. And now's the time. I'll save myself the embarrassment in sharing how old I was when this transpired...or the fact that I damn near had a melt down, wondering if I was pregnant...or that I actually went to the store to purchase a Plan B. With that said folks, two words...

Sex education.

In efforts to see if I was the only woman wondering if she could've been the next "Virgin Mary", numerous internet questions, Google searches, and threads confirms our sex education is hanging on by a thread. And I know it to be true, because when I think of high school education, I think of two words.

Whale sperm.

Somehow, I remember discussing the ejaculation fluid of the biggest marine animal, but I can't remember that we actually talked about the reproductive system, sexuality, the act of sex, consent, teen pregnancy, STI/STD's, or sexual pleasure. I didn't know what a Plan B was. But, I knew I needed to take that shit if I wasn't on birth control or didn't want a baby. Remember? Nana said my ass couldn't bring no babies home. So, that must mean I have to keep taking them to be baby free. After some frequent visits to a pharmacy and I'm sure HUNDREDS of dollars that could have been in my young pockets later...let's talk about sex baby.

Well, let's talk about...how it's NOT being talked about in our black schools, black homes or black churches. And as a result, while teen birth rates are at a record low, the United States (US) teen pregnancy rate is still substantially higher than other western industrialized nations. And furthermore, racial/ethnic and geographic disparities in teen birth rates persist. Black girls are more than twice as likely as white girls to become pregnant before leaving adolescence. And furthermore...southern states, which tend to be poorer and have the highest rates of HIV infections, report having the highest number of teen births (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention; Wiltz).

It's no doubt, that families play an important role in educating their own children. But, to be quite honest...not every family has the privilege of being at home normally when their child gets home from school, on school breaks,;etc. To keep it a buck, a lot of black (and Latinx) parents work...and work...and work...and work overtime...just to make ends meet. So, to recognize that shit really is real...some people just don't have time for this "at-home" sex ed. And are just desperately hoping/assuming the kids get it on their own...get it at school...and just praying we're not out here repeating a generational thing...until we do. Can you blame them fully? When you live in a country where housing rates are constantly on the rise, there's food insecurity in the hood, and violence is surging...sex ed is not a priority- money, eating,...and trying not to get shot is.

But, that's not why we're here. So, I'll keep my public health rants to a minimum. We're here because if we can't talk about sex at home...if parents are busy...if sex ed is not a priority...or parents are maybe avoidant and/or deflecting...or perhaps need a little more help being more "open", "engaging", and "supporting"...then the next in line after our family is ...the schoolhouse. And...our churches.

In addition to schools, the black church is, can, and should be an important partner and community stakeholder in providing community sex education and preventing teen pregnancy. When I was just a horny high schooler trying to skip class with my boyfriend, we should've focused less on the A's I was told to focus on getting and more on discussing contraceptives/condoms (and fucking Plan B's!). In her 2017 dissertation for the University of Oklahoma, Dr. Lanita Wright questions black church pastors and parents about knowledge/beliefs about sexuality education, the church's role in preventing teen pregnancy, and implementation obstacles. The results showed that all pastors believed the Black Church should address teen pregnancy with parents but two major obstacles were present- perceived social consequences (ie. resistant ass parents) and discomfort with discussing contraceptives and condoms. Pastors reported being willing to partner with organizations, but most had reservations due to conflict with the church's mission values. As it relates to parents, most parents said there should be no boundaries on the type of sexuality information shared by their church...

But...

Later changed their minds after reviewing a list of potential topics. Parents believed in parent-child communication (rolls eyes), goals and dreams, and relationships as what was most important for teen-pregnant intervention (Harris).

I'll stop right here.

I appreciated reading this by Ms. Harris. Mostly, because I believe that we believe the same thing- that sex and teen birth rates is an intersecting health issue for public health, the black community, and the black church. I find it interesting, that despite all this “parent-child communication” parents are advocating for...and sticking to the church’s mission...that black students still go off to college (or into the military...or into the workforce) and learn more about sex, pleasure, and pregnancy (and other consequences) in the real world...as if it’s supposed to be like dating- trial and error. A 2011 study even reports that college seniors may have learned more about sex, pregnancy, and sexuality during their time at college, as opposed to knowledge gained from home or high school (Franklin and Dotger). I don’t know about you, but that is one too many questions and posts that make you go “What the fuck?”, on HBCU and other Twitter Confessions.

I know I would’ve appreciated a more detailed “sex-talk” prior to college. My wallet, my constant birth-control method switching, and my endless worries and fake pregnancy scares would’ve appreciated it, too.

It’s apparent that black schools, families, and churches are a little hesitant to the whole pulling out a banana thing...and showing you how the thrusts or giving head should work....where it should go....how to put on condoms...or even implementing sexuality workshops or interventions among adolescents and young adults (because we need it, too). And, unfortunately, they may never feel “comfort” unless it is rooted in ethical, patriarchal, and/or biblical principles.

There is no change in comfort though. In fact, all we have are the walls of discomfort, education, and health care to adequately address sex, sex education, and reproductive rights. So, who’s willing to get uncomfortable first?

.....

“I get high off your memory”

---Nicki Minaj

I would’ve killed for someone to tell me having a high sex drive was okay...was natural. I would’ve also killed for someone to also say “Do it Dia. Just use your fingers.” But there I’d lay in bed, trying to figure out what was happening...why my hormones were deceiving me...how could I make them stop...when I’d be ready to “do it”...and eventually swiping on Tinder because Spike Lee knew....SHE’S GOTTA HAVE IT.

As a 20-something single woman, I’ve spent years “battling against my flesh” and the sexual temptations and fantasies in my mind. I grew up wanting to be “pure” and fighting against lust. At least, that’s what I was taught in church. But, I eventually began to think...I really didn’t care about waiting until marriage. I was okay with being in a sexually satisfying relationship with someone I cared about deeply...passionately...and they didn’t have to be my “husband”. Could I still honor God that way?

The “True Love Waits” messages says otherwise, enforcing that sex is bad outside of marriage...that single women can’t make choices about their body...that single women can’t have sex for any other reason but marriage....that once I found “the one”, then sex would be simply amazing .

All too well I remember unfulfilled sexual desires and viewed my sex drive as something negative. I thought somehow I was “bad” and that I needed God to send my man to “save” me, so they could just go away. We’d become friends...we’d “date for marriage”...and then they’d just reappear on my wedding night. Needless to say, having a high sex drive as a woman or my sexuality period, was never up for discussion.

Real life got much more complicated when I became older, had gone through various dead-end relationships that made sex feel okay, and was learning how to get a handle on being single. Trying to learn what works for me has been an ongoing challenge in trying to address the questions- Can I handle being friends with benefits? Do I just want to date and have sex with one person? Do I need to have an emotional connection to experience sex? Do I need to be in a serious, committed relationship to have sex? Furthermore, I am finally learning how to give myself permission to never justify my decision to be abstinent, become sexually active, become abstinent again, to be celibate, or to fuck the shit out of anyone I'm physically attracted to. My body, my choices. And instead of preaching "true love waits" so frequently...I really longed for my church or family to teach the lesson and power of owning my sexual desires on my terms...and consent.

Substance Use

“So I pop pills for 'em”

---Nicki Minaj

I was a junior in college when I finally realized I was struggling with anxiety and depression. Facing circumstances that was beyond my control, I began to feel like a failure. Having been a high over-achiever all of my life, those feelings were damn near foreign to me. So, I began to wonder if there was a reason maybe God was punishing me. I began spiraling into the depths of mind, groveling into heaps of guilt about my past, my lies, my traumas, and putting a poker face on in class each day....when behind close doors, I was taking any pill I could get a hand on, just to go to sleep.

My own trials with “substances” did not stop there. I started drinking when sleeping pills were no longer working, weren't working fast enough, or I wanted some good sleep. I knew that alcohol was something like a best friend when life wasn't going right, when relationships were reaching breaking points, and when I wanted to just slip away from reality. My problems with reality was all my physical manifestations of my anxiety- my heart that was constantly racing, my hands always shaking, and thoughts of this ever present “doom” coming for me. “Fading” made everything slower...but only for a moment. And that moment lasted until I laid awake in bed one night, like all the nights before...only this time...I was finally wanting it to all be over...telling God I was ready to come home. If you've ever heard me tell this story, this was the night I believe I finally heard God's voice for myself. Because God didn't want me to die that night.

My grandfather liked getting faded, too, while I was growing up. Struggling with alcoholism, he is a Vietnam Veteran who struggled to fight his own demons. I remember growing up in our house, promising myself a life free from addiction, cigarettes, or alcohol abuse. And yet, there I was in 2017....speeding on an interstate with an open container. What was I rushing to? It wasn't my physical death, but it was the death of the woman Adia was then. I never felt so....shattered. And even after my experience in college...I still tried to put pieces together with bottles. With potions. I never talked to my grandfather about overcoming his addiction, and my grandmother's ideas of warnings were just to avoid a single sip all together. But how realistic was that really?

Nonetheless, these are struggles she doesn't know ever occurred...because I was too ashamed to tell her...or anyone else.

I suppose my grandfather and I are just two people of many who had to fight our bouts with potions. According to the U.S. Bureau of the Census, there are 44 million people of African origin in the U.S. This comprises 13.4% of the total population, and the rates of substance use and abuse among our population are significantly different from the rest of the country (Kaliszewski). While people of color are more likely to seek treatment for drug additions or a substance problem, we are less likely to actually complete a program (Saloner, Brendan, and Benjamin Lê Cook). This doesn't particularly surprise me when the structures within our communities tell us to pray away our struggles and capitalism and financial barriers make completing programs against such struggles unlikely. Thus, the only way out so it seems....is through our own will....and through our own faith.

For nothing will be impossible with God.

Luke 1:37

Pornography & Masturbation

*“In due time, we’ll be fine...
In due time.”*

--Nicki Minaj

So, I have a favorite toy now called the “Satisfyer Pro 2”. When I’m comfortable in my bed at home, where I now live with my parents...I make sure it’s charged, I make sure everyone is sleep, and I schedule some nice, fun, sexual self-care. Sometimes, it includes erotica. Sometimes, it includes an erotic video. And sometimes... it just includes me...relishing in the beautiful, delightful, sexual body the good Lord has blessed me with. It’s taken a while to get here. No need for modesty. It’s actually taken a long time. When desire, sex, and pleasure is tied to men and marriage, masturbation, self-pleasure and self-love isn’t a thing.

When you’ve been “Flee from sexual immorality” (1 Corinthians 6:18) to death, pornography isn’t a thing, either.

I was six when I saw porn for the first time. I was at a sleepover and at the wee hours of the late night...our curiosities led us to, you guessed it- “Girls Gone Wild”. After what I guess was sheer curiosity, I did some searching of more girls gone wild on my own after the sleepover. My cousin’s computer history said it all, too. And it was a wrap. I’ll never forget the disgust and shame in that moment as she told my family what I was up to on the internet, setting the tone that pornography, sexuality, and my body was equally disgusting and shameful.

This was my first and last encounter until I became a (somewhat) functioning adult. By the time I’d reach my 20s, pornography and masturbation was still taboo. On one hand, I didn’t hear too many people discussing it. On the other hand, I recall a college classmate buying me my first toy years ago. I never used it.

When we discuss pornography in the public health world, we’ll discuss it as a tool for violence and trafficking of young girls and women, particularly women of color. In the context of feminism and/or the erotic, we might mention pornography as a tool of sexual empowerment or the very thing that fights against our eros. The late Audre Lorde, famous writer, feminist, womanist, and activist, said it herself. Lorde states that pornography emphasizes sensation without feeling, whereas the erotic (ie. eros) is a measure of our sense of self and the chaos of our strongest emotions. I believe it all to be true. Besides, I’m not feeling too much watching two strangers on my screen, except my own desire to close the orgasm gap.

The point is...we discuss pornography and masturbation somewhere along the way of trying to figure out our sexual desires, trying to fight sexual fantasies, and/or defending our personal theses on the impact of pornography on relationships and marriages. It’s a slim chance that we ever assess one’s erotic or bodily autonomy growing up in black churches or communities. We do, however, accept the notion that a woman’s erotic exists only for man’s existence. We accept that certain clothes in the church house are unacceptable for women because of her erotic or fat ass. And we definitely accept that the erotic, the orgasm, and the clitoris are words not to be used in traditional, black homes.

I've learned that some black people are afforded the privilege of having "open" families or parents- ones that will support the dismantling of the world's desire to have agency over women's bodies, ones that will have open dialogue about kinks, video girls, or casual dating. And ones that truly just want their daughters (or sons) to be happy....even if their "happy" is sexual fulfillment. I'm not quite sure the collective black community has caught on yet or will ever rally behind this, although I hope they will. But as for me and my house...we shall raise sex positivity.

Dating, Relationships, & Marriage

*“They see you doin' good, now it's kinda
hard to diss you.*

*Niggas be sick when they remember all
the bad they wished you.”*

--Nicki Minaj

My first boyfriend was in high school. While the actual relationship was short-lived, little did I know my off and on, emotionally abusive romance with him would carry me into college. And I would not actually leave until my junior year...when he finally ghosted me. My 20's has afforded me a lot of time to learn a lot about healthy relationships, dating, and intimacy. Some of my biggest lessons being: you can't rush your healing journey, the love languages, hurt people hurt people, people can only love you as much as they know how to love themselves, to desire and/or love also means to suffer, and ghosting is not okay...yet so inevitable. In addition to these, I think the biggest lesson I've learned is summed up in two words-attachment style.

Secure.

Anxious.

Dismissive avoidant.

Fearful avoidant.

These are all the ways in which our bond formed with our primary caregiver (usually a parent) and eventually, our intimate partners. I've gone through a number of therapy sessions to learn that I am a fearful avoidant to a tee-someone who strongly fears rejection, has high relationship anxiety, and craves love...yet pushes it away when I get it. Books, therapists, and research will tell you that this is a result of not feeling safe as a child, having one or both emotionally unavailable parents, and/or living in a constant state of stress or chaos.

For these reasons, I understand I cannot control my familiar circumstances, my family environment, or the way in which I was raised. I can't get a re-do. Despite how tumultuous the relationships around me were, I don't know what kind of alternate life would wait for me if anything was different. I'd like to think maybe better, but circumstances lead me to believe that isn't the case. I also know I can't and don't expect therapy to “fix” me. There are wounds I will always carry from my upbringing....crosses I will always bear. I recognize, however, the ways in which relationships were modeled and framed to me by the world around me. The ways in which violence, emotional abuse, emotional turmoil, and conflict was handled. The ways in which dreams are sold it is better to stay than leave...whether it be for the sake of children, love, or not being alone. The ways in which a dangerous theology and ideology is preached that it is better to stay married if you've got a “good” husband or a “good” woman...or that divorce is essentially never supposed to happen (Luke 16:18; Matthew 5:32; 1 Corinthians 7:10-11; 1 Corinthians 7:15). The ways in which love and prayer is always the answer...until it isn't.

Living in communities ranked as the worst states for violence against women...where women are gunned down in the streets...where men will taunt, curse, and beat women like it's nothing. It goes without saying... that sometimes love and prayer is not enough. More than 2 in 5 women will experience either physical violence, sexual violence, or intimate partner stalking in their lifetimes. In the State of South Carolina alone, we have finally moved out of the top 10 states for women killed by men, since 1996 (Fortier-Bensen).

Religion and churches are a personal and institutional reality in the lives of many women, just like me. Because of it, next to our family and communities, the church provides significant context as we address dating, relationships, marriage, violence, and victimization. Through texts, teachings, spiritual groups,;etc....the church continues to play an impact on values and belief systems to its congregation. While some may decipher the Bible and Sunday morning sermons as resources and empowerment to leave abuse and find safety and healing...others may be led to excuse, condone, and permit emotionally manipulative, narcissistic, territorial, and very dangerous behavior in relationships (Fortune and Enger). Consequently, this leads to generations of women accepting toxic masculinity, infidelity, and inescapably creating a vicious cycle of ideals and narratives passed to younger women that it is better to stay (VAWnet 2005). It is better to endure pain. It is better to be with someone....than alone.

One of those younger women...was me.

But, we should not fear being alone...even though every holiday season it can be a single woman's worst nightmare. Coming home yet again, the "Are you dating anyone?" question can be intimidating. The "You're not seeing anyone yet?" question can feel daunting. And if we're surrounded by so many "relationship goals", the timeline for marriage and children can feel forced, rushed, and a frequent chase in streetcars named desire...that we may not even want.

While my family never forced marriage on me, it was still an aspiration I felt I should have. At least, it was an aspiration every woman in my family seemed to manage as I was a child....even in frequent arguments, a lack of emotional coaching, and domestic violence. Currently, on every given day, my family will encourage me to take my time...to choose my equal...and to never settle. Sometimes, I often wonder if these statements are out of regret. And sometimes, my savior complex wishes I could release them from their shackles if it is. So, while we continuously spend our time now discussing less and less about marriage and dating...and more about my goals and big dreams to uproot, travel, heal, and cherish being my own great love...we missed important conversations in the past about calling the shots in my sex life, intimacy, how to communicate, how to trust, how to be in a healthy relationship....how to love.

And in that same vein, young Adia so desperately needed more girl talks about dating, how to pick emotionally available partners, how to not be so available...how rejection is more about compatibility and less about a blow to my ego's self-esteem and sense of worth. How to leave.

Emotions & Being a Black Superwoman

"Yo, people'll love you and support you when it's beneficial"

--Nicki Minaj

Growing up seeing limited emotions is hard enough, but growing up seeing emotions that you can't take care of...is a different kind of struggle. How is one to cope with one parent saying "I'm better off dead" or another silently weeping in the midnight hour? What do you do...when you can't do anything? I'll tell you what you do.

You do everything.

You become everything...to everybody. You become superwoman. And you work..and bend...and mend...and toil to make everyone else happy. To prevent anymore tears. To prevent anymore pain. And it lasts for some time, but peace never stays. And you? Well you hoard your emotions, because there's no more space in a house that's not a home...for yours. Or you shut down, because you don't know how to deal with your sensitivities...your inner conflict. You don't know you're an empath and/or a highly sensitive person (HSP). You don't know conflict, noises, drama, external environments, and literally everything affects you differently. Everything impacts you like a lot of noise, coming at you loudly (Aron; Orloff). But you stay quiet. You deal with your own complexities, your own anxiety, your own fears, your own depression alone...and with potions...to not bother anybody. You dissipate...slowly...hiding and treating emotions as your weakness.

Until superwoman isn't so super anymore. In fact, superwoman wasn't a hero at all...until she became her own. Until she saved her herself. Until she realized emotions and "feelings" weren't the enemy at all. They were her strength.

Any of this resonate with you?

If you're black, indigenous, or any person of color (BIPOC), it most likely will. The image of the strong black woman is resilient, driven to succeed, and devoted with unwavering loyalty to those around her. Engraved in generations of our history, some of us wear this as a fucking badge of honor...perhaps to show how much we can juggle...perhaps to ensure we keep something in our black world since the white world around us could give a damn about us...or perhaps to avoid something not ingrained in our roots and systematic oppression-"doing the work"...healing our traumas...becoming divinely connected to our "feels"...and relishing in the luxury of self-care.

But who has time for spilling out and processing emotions? Who has time for self care? I hear this continuously from women in my own family, because they're "too busy" caring for their own husbands, raising children and schooling, church commitments, caregiving, community service...the list could go on. But, it goes without saying that black women are the ones who need emotional guidance, self-care, and (dare I say) therapy the most. According to a 2019 study, the stresses of trying to not only cope with racism...but doing it all, physically and emotionally, for everyone else except our damn selves leaves black women connected to several risk factors that could leave women more susceptible to health problems, including heart disease (Felix et al. 2019). And as heroic as this physical and/or emotional caregiving may seem, it actually hurt the health and longevity of black women in this study. Sigh. But as Maya Angelou said, still...we rise.

We rise to the occasion every single day, until our time is done and we grieve and celebrate and praise our black families and in our black churches about just how much “she gave herself to everybody”...just how much “she was doing the Lord’s work”...and just how much...“she’s gone too soon”.

Cause I am a Superwoman
Yes I am
Yes she is
Even when I'm a mess
I still put on a vest
With an S on my chest
Oh yes
I'm a Superwoman

ALICIA KEYS

To tell the truth is to become
beautiful, to begin to love yourself,
value yourself. And that's political, in
its most profound way.

JUNE JORDAN

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