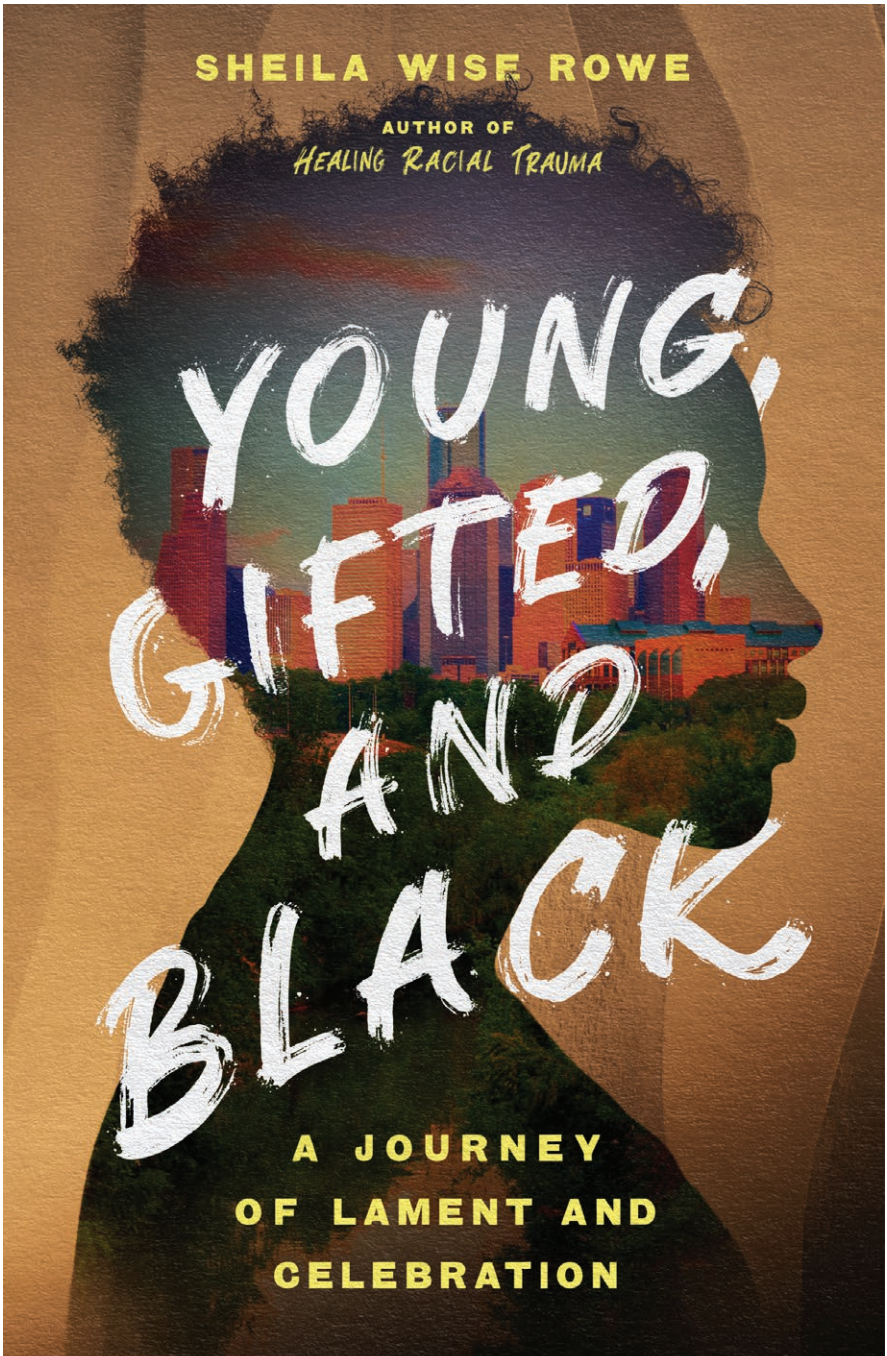


SHEILA WISE ROWE

AUTHOR OF
HEALING RACIAL TRAUMA



**YOUNG,
GIFTED,
AND
BLACK**

**A JOURNEY
OF LAMENT AND
CELEBRATION**



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THE STARTING LINE

The Journey Begins

You have equal if not more talent at times, but you don't have the same opportunities. You don't necessarily have the same doors open to you . . . or resources that could be put towards your dreams. You—a lot of the times—don't have family members that have ever achieved the things that you want to do.

CHADWICK BOSEMAN

After his groundbreaking movie *Black Panther* won the top film prize at the 2019 Screen Actors Guild Awards, the late actor Chadwick Boseman borrowed language from Nina Simone's song "To Be Young, Gifted and Black," a powerful 1969 anthem of the civil rights movement. Much like Chadwick's movie, Nina's lyrics celebrate Black love, hope, and joy, while not shying away from lament and grief born out of suffering, loss, and regret. A line from Nina's song calls us to consider "what a lovely precious dream. To be young, gifted and black. Open your heart to what I mean."¹ Her song continues to honor and inspire Black folks of all ages from across America and around the world.

In his speech, Chadwick said, "To be young, gifted and Black—we all knew that we had something special that we wanted to give the world, that we could be full human beings in the roles that we

were playing, that we could create a world that exemplified a world that we wanted to see.”² He continued backstage, “And when you aspire to do something that is outside the realm of what the world would see you doing . . . to be young, gifted and Black is all of that. It’s to have everything but then not be quite able to grasp it and to be able to persevere through that though.”³

This book is both *for* and *about* those gifted, Black millennials and younger adults who dream and strive for a better life and a better world. And it’s for those, like me, who were gifted young adults and are now processing our life stories, or are raising the next generation.

If life is like a race, then our lives begin at the starting line. There are rules to follow, such as where and how we are to take up our position. Then we wait for the referee to instruct us to “get on our marks, get set, go.” During the race, we must stay in our lane. Taking all factors into account, we can assume each runner has a fair shot at winning. However, this is not always the case because there may be obstacles along the way. In life, these impediments may come from home, community, church, and society. The obstacles we face may give rise to stability or instability. The impact is undeniable, yet unique for each of us.

It’s important to note here that the Black experience is not a monolith. An article in *The New Republic* notes: “We don’t all agree on what blackness or Americanness means, or whether we should even reconcile those two things. But we all have our own stories, and those stories are crucial to understanding the experience of black millennials [and others] and what that experience says about our country [and our faith].”⁴

For over thirty years, I was a therapist for folks of various ages and stages of life. The settings varied from public schools, residential facilities, prisons, universities, private practice, and the

church. I saw how personal, societal, and educational interventions primarily focused on those deemed most at risk of harms, such as neglect, abuse, racial profiling, poverty, and incarceration. I want to make it clear that I don't diminish the need for such support. We are all unique, gifted, and at risk in one way or another. We certainly need more initiatives to help those most at risk identify and nurture their gifts and aspirations. Yet, there are Black millennials and younger adults who are at risk but in a different way than the usual understanding of *at risk*. We celebrate them for their academics, arts, sports, trades, leadership, and entrepreneurship. They appear to be self-sufficient and high functioning, but they are also in need of support. A report from the Education Resources Information Center (ERIC) reported that research about academically gifted Black students rarely focuses on these students' socio-emotional, psychological needs and development.⁵ I would argue the same is true for the limited number of studies about those gifted in areas apart from academics. Gifted Black folks face many challenges, as their emotional, physical, spiritual, or relational needs and struggles are often overlooked.

**WE ARE ALL UNIQUE, GIFTED, AND AT RISK
IN ONE WAY OR ANOTHER.**

As much as I'd like this book to include every gifted person's unique journey, it does not. Throughout it are stories of specific young folks, including my young adult children. There are similarities and differences in how they process their Blackness, identity, trauma, giftedness, and faith. Like all of us, their lives are also characterized by both lament and celebration. Their stories and the Scripture references may help each of us to feel seen and heard, and validate our own inner lives and experiences.

GREAT EXPECTATIONS

Before we go any further, it is essential that we commit to being gentle, compassionate, and caring with ourselves as we look at what has happened. We have held so many conflicting feelings for far too long, and the last thing we need is an angry voice telling us to get it together. We can agree to treat and speak to ourselves in the way we would like a dear friend to speak to us: one who encourages us to rest when we need it or keep moving when we are ready and able.

We start by examining how our own past issues may contribute to our perceptions and great expectations of the young, gifted, and Black and what we need. When we were children, many of us had aspirations for the future. Some of us spent long hours studying and practicing our craft, and many times we had to choose this over our friendships. Now as adults, if someone asks, “What advice would you give your younger self?” some may quickly respond, “I’d say, ‘Chill out, things will get better.’” This may sound like an odd statement for a gifted Black adult to say regarding their younger years. But the reason why is their childhood was a mixed blessing.

Many of us had significant adults in our lives who were positive influences, yet we also faced visible and invisible lines or barriers and dysfunction in and outside of our homes. Some of us wished the adults would have asked us how we were doing. We needed explanations about what was happening to and around us. We wanted to feel less alone with our thoughts and the fragments of misinformation streaming through our heads. Along the way, we also faced racism that was clever in disguising itself, yet its tentacles were—and are—embedded in most institutions and systems in this country, affecting all our lives. We needed answers, but there were no easy answers to be found. All of those

experiences left almost indelible marks on us. This was certainly the case for me.

I am a survivor of court-mandated school desegregation in Boston, Massachusetts. I survived name-calling, verbal and physical threats, accusations of cheating, and the educators' attempts to prevent me from aiming high and dreaming big. In the middle of this volatile time, my parents separated. A few days after Daddy moved out of our home and into that of another woman, I overheard a heated exchange between my mother, Momae, and a male relative as I hid in an adjacent room. He said Daddy wasn't coming back, and there was no way she could raise nine kids on her own, suggesting she parcel us out to live with relatives.

Momae demanded he leave, and she returned to the kitchen to attend to a pot of beef stew on the stove. I watched Momae lower her head so we wouldn't notice her tear-stained face. When I glanced at her that day, I saw a steely-eyed determination. Rather than being hindered, she interwove loose threads of grief with a decision to keep our family together. Like her ancestors, the systemic barriers and limited funds would not stop her from searching out bargains, discount tickets, and scholarships to visit museums and attend summer camps. I excelled academically, won awards, and was accepted into several prestigious colleges. My parents and teachers celebrated me and had great expectations for my life. Yet my early life was also one of both lament and celebration.

If you are like me, you may now have a platform of importance in the community, on the world stage—or you may feel unseen and unheard. Regardless, who we are and what we've accomplished is phenomenal, and some folks are in awe. But they are unaware of all that has transpired for us to be or become those walking miracles. Many of us live under the pressure and weight of our own—and

other people's—expectations. We work doubly hard while the starting line continually shifts. And sometimes, the starting line is unseen because someone wrote it in invisible ink. We took our place at the starting line, and now we are awakening to the fact that our inner and outer worlds have been full of grace, striving, and struggling for Black excellence. No one told us the accolades come and go, and we will often fight for every scrap. So, we hide our battle with anger, anxiety, perfectionism, and tears.

We are perched high on a pedestal, so high that sometimes we teeter in our chairs. We wonder who will truly listen, see, and *still* love all of who we are. We think about what has contributed to our desire for perfectionism, wondering if it was passed down through past generations. Our lives may mimic the journey our parents or caregivers took, some of whom were parentified children who took care of everyone, and then raised children in the same manner. And now, perhaps for the first time, we see that the gifted child in our family, community, or classroom is a mini version of ourselves. Our hearts stir with love and compassion for them because we see how throughout our lives, we've all followed the same rules of engagement.

THE RULES OF ENGAGEMENT

Some rules of engagement encourage us to be and to do better. We know of the commandment written in Luke 6:3, “Do to others as you would have them do to you.” And even as we struggle to live out this commandment, we believe it is good and right, so we try. There are other rules of engagement, however, established by our families, church, and society that were often debilitating and unspoken, but everyone knew to uphold them at all costs. I've adapted and expanded the rules from the work of author and clinician Dr. Claudia Black⁶ that demand we must:

- ◆ Never reveal our actual needs or feelings because we will only be disappointed—the needs of other folks are more important.
- ◆ Never speak up about what is happening because our voices will be silenced—we must hide the truth or go into hiding from God, ourselves, and others.
- ◆ Never trust anyone, including ourselves—that way, we will never get hurt.

I've identified three additional rules of engagement:

- ◆ Never challenge the status quo—we are to do as we are told, not ask questions, or seek to understand why.
- ◆ Don't believe there is one who loves us unconditionally.
- ◆ Don't think for ourselves.

As we closely follow these unhealthy rules of engagement, our lives can become imbalanced. We may believe that we must perform or follow the rules to receive approval, stay relevant, be accepted, loved, or even tolerated. It's hard for us to know when we just need to stop or when we need to do something. During stressful times, we overperform in such ways that we only feel as good as our last accomplishment. And when things don't go as well as we planned, it can be devastating. We may have legitimate concerns and fears of vulnerability or being abused or exposed as weak. So, we either wall off from others or seek to control them before we are controlled. But a consequence is that we sometimes distance ourselves from the Lord and other people who love us. We question whether our friends are there for us. We can't see or understand what Jesus is doing in, through, and around us. Nor do we realize the Lord offers us unmerited and unearned love and favor.

THE HEALING JOURNEY

The South African word *ubuntu* loosely translates, “I am because we are,” and highlights how our lives are deeply intertwined and impacted by one another. Without *ubuntu*, individualism, possessiveness, and self-centeredness are the order of the day. We need support from others, especially as we grapple with issues around race, equity, belonging, reconciliation, and revolution. Black folks in general and specifically young adults are trying to find a footing in our families, communities, this country, and around the world.

This book aims to identify and better equip young adults, their friends, parents, pastors, educators, and allies to walk together in the pursuit of healing and more well-rounded lives. We will begin our journey at the starting line, and in subsequent chapters, we will follow the journey of several gifted ones. In these stories, we can see how people and structures celebrated and encouraged us. We will also see those who inflicted pain and sought to prevent us from feeling. When we cannot tell our own stories, our bodies will tell the tale. So, we will explore specific lines or barriers that affect our lives and community. And we will delve more into lament and celebration, needed support, and the way of healing and grace.

NO TWO PEOPLE WILL HEAL PRECISELY THE SAME.

The journey of healing is an intensely emotional process that cannot be rushed or ignored. It doesn't occur in an orderly way with fixed steps. No two people will heal precisely the same. Increasingly, we become aware of the emotional baggage from the past, and we seek to offload it so we can freely move forward. Famed Nigerian novelist Chinua Achebe wrote, “If you don't like

someone's story, write your own."⁷ I believe this is a call to uncover and recover from the words and wounds written on our hearts, minds, and bodies by someone else.

I realize that if I am calling folks to live authentically and vulnerably, I have to do the same no matter the cost. I must tell the complex and messy truth about myself and my family in every life story I write. I also deal with the residual shame of my journey and the risk of being misunderstood. As we lament or celebrate our continuing story, we have not been taught to hold the tension between the now and the not yet. However, the Lord can show us how to reject the pulls toward the meaningless activity we face on an almost daily basis. In that quiet space with the Lord, we can confront things we've run from and actively avoided by doing too much—or too little—and learn to sit with uncomfortable and unfamiliar feelings for a time. But *how*?

Preparing. A first step in the healing journey can be to use a real or imagined container to hold our thoughts and feelings. We can write about our experiences and emotions in a journal or a letter, place them in a container, and put them away until we are ready to look at them and address the feelings they invoke. This helps clear a pathway toward healing. There are verses such as Proverbs 4:11–12 that give us assurance from the Lord: "I will guide you in the way of wisdom, and I will lead you in upright paths. When you walk, your steps will not be hampered, and when you run, you will not stumble."

Lamenting. Often the next stop on the journey is taking time to lament. We can lament in a form of prayer where we pour out our complaints to God. There are many laments in the Bible, such as in the books of Psalms and Lamentations. They are honest, raw, and speak to the truth of how we feel and also to the reality of the

ways the Lord loves and cares for us. If we look at the Psalms of lament, we see there is often a pattern that can serve as a model for us: acknowledge how God has been faithful to us in the past, vulnerably voice our complaints and ask for help, and finish by trusting and praising God.

Dr. Soong-Chan Rah writes, “Lament creates space for this dialogue [with God] and moves the theology of suffering into interaction with the theology of celebration.”⁸ We can speak our lament in prayer or write it down. Jesus helps us to release our pain, and if need be, to forgive from the heart as he begins his mysterious work of healing. From that posture of being with Jesus, we can hear his healing words of life that help us grow in resilience and bounce back stronger than before.

Through other folks. We need Jesus *and* we need other people to help us to acknowledge what happened, what we’ve lost, and how we feel regarding it to begin to heal. So in the next phase of our journey, we look for where God is at work, how he has extended—and continues to extend—grace, where we find inner strength, and how his love shows up through people.

As we share ourselves and others listen to our whole story, we feel seen and known. They create space, and their presence can be life changing. Listeners can come in many forms, such as a trusted friend, family member, or therapist. Profound healing can occur as we journey through this process with a trustworthy friend.

Healing can also happen when we share in a safe, supportive group. We tell our own story, and we also listen to the stories of others. As we witness each other’s stories, we find the encouragement to take small steps toward healing and walk more fully in our gifting and calling. Within a group, we can see “a living, breathing illustration of how stories overlap in a powerful way to inform, confirm, contradict, challenge, and inspire.”⁹

My earliest experience in a support group was as a participant. I was skeptical about joining the group because, as a counselor, I thought I'd heard it all before and considered myself to be self-aware. As the group members shared their trauma stories and experiences in and outside of their families, I respectfully listened. But occasionally, my eyes drifted to the birds on the tree outside the window. However, when a group member shared how her parents' divorce affected her, I became fully present. She said she couldn't ask them what happened, so she just blamed herself. Growing up, she followed the rules: "just do what you are told and don't question or try to understand why." This young woman, who was an accomplished architect, often blamed herself for failures in her relationships while also facing racism and bias at the company where she worked. As I listened, I realized the similarities in our stories.

Rewriting our story. When the group leader prayed at the end of the support-group session, a memory surfaced of my older sister and me. We were in our best dresses and sitting on the front steps of our house. We were waiting for Daddy to pick us up for a visit. We waited for what felt like hours, being careful not to get dirt on our dresses. Our daddy never showed up that day. There were subsequent visits where he did arrive, but I believe this memory surfaced to remind me that I needed more profound healing in that area.

On an emotional level, I was still sitting on the steps on my best behavior, waiting for my daddy to show up. I sought out a therapist and received individual counseling to work through this. Eventually, I was able to emotionally get off the steps and fully embrace life. I was rewriting my story.

A clearer picture of our lives may emerge as we write and share our stories. In this way, we can rewrite our story, usually from a more nuanced perspective. While reading through each chapter,

be attentive to how the phrases, imagery, or life lessons affirm or challenge your own story.

REFLECTIONS AND PRAYER PRACTICES

Whether individually or in a group setting, memories may surface. It may happen while reading this book, engaging in the reflections, and participating in embodied prayer practices at the end of each chapter. All of this helps our healing journey. It is essential to remember that seeing a counselor also helps. In Philippians 4:6-7, we read, “Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.” Prayer involves giving, receiving, listening, and talking. It is a way in which the Lord deposits within us his peace and joy. Some of us struggle to accept this invitation and to pray regularly. Prayer is a two-way communication where we have the assurance that God hears us and wants to answer the most resounding cries of our hearts. Although Jesus states, “I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me. . . . They will listen to my voice, and there shall be one flock and one shepherd. . . . My sheep listen to my voice.” (John 10:14–16, 27), some of us question if we can hear from God. The Lord is constantly speaking to us, and he is willing and able to communicate in many ways. The Holy Spirit will bring us into all truth, whether it’s through the Word, a still small voice, prayer, a situation, a person, pictures, or a gut-level hunch. We must make the time and place to get quiet enough to pray and listen and remain open to his voice as we go about our day.

As we learn to listen for God’s voice and distinguish it from other voices, know that God always speaks to us from a place of love and with compassion and mercy. Even when asking us to face

difficult truths about ourselves or a situation, God's messages always lead to clarity, release, and relief. If you hear a message that is mean-spirited or demoralizing, it isn't God speaking.

Reflection. The reflections include questions to consider, tips, and tools to engage in. They can help us uncover and process our thoughts and feelings and begin to heal.

Embodied prayer practices. These prayer practices help us to engage our heart, mind, and body in prayer. They can encourage personal soul care, and reduce stress and anxiety, while reminding us of the Lord's presence. These are personalized, breath, and listening prayers.

Personalized prayer. These are lengthy prayers that we can personalize and then pray silently or aloud.

The breath prayer. One Christ-centered embodied prayer—a style of praying that emerged from the early church—is the breath prayer. When engaging the breath prayer, sit comfortably and slowly breathe in while expanding the belly. While inhaling, silently say the first part of a Scripture verse or express a need. Hold the breath. Then, slowly exhale while silently repeating the rest of the verse or prayer or take this time to discard lies or anything that needs to be confessed or let go.

Listening prayer. Some prayers invite us to listen and look at what weighs on our hearts and minds, wants, and needs. We can take those concerns and pray about them and ask the Lord what he thinks. We can listen for a response. We may get a nudge or be led to a Scripture verse. We can then respond to what the Lord is revealing.

All of these formational healing prayers and practices can help uncover where “our ‘loves’ are attached to the wrong thing—causing us to show up in the world without the freedom to be who God is making us into.”¹⁰ These prayers and practices also reveal

how we show up authentically; and where we don't, we're invited to journey toward healing. As we keep a record of our prayers, responses to the reflections, and insights gleaned, we also begin to recognize joy, beauty, and blessings. We see how Emmanuel God is with us, and we celebrate how far we've come on the journey. Our new rule of engagement is that Jesus always welcomes us. He alone heals the pain and meets the deepest needs of the ever brave, bright, and shiny ones. The starting line is no longer on shifting sand. Jesus is with us on the journey to reset it and all the other lines or barriers that try to hinder us. He is the firm foundation where we can stand secure as we learn to hold lament and celebration. So, let's begin this journey together.

REFLECTION

- ◆ How have you been celebrated in your family, community, school, etc.?
- ◆ Are there rules of engagement you follow(ed)?
- ◆ Take note of any questions or memories that surface as you read the chapter.

EMBODIED PRAYER PRACTICE

Breath prayer. As we continue on this journey, we will need courage and strength. This breath prayer helps release stress and anxiety. Right now, we can remember to accept the perfect love Jesus offers and pray for this love to cast out all fear (1 John 4:18).

Breathe in: Place your hands on your heart and breathe in. As your belly expands with air, silently say, "Jesus, I breathe in your perfect love." Then, hold your breath for a count of six or seven.

Breathe out: Now exhale and silently say, "Lord, your perfect love drives out fear."

Repeat the breath prayer several times.

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