



Helen "Skip" Skipper //



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I roll through this beautiful journey called life consistently in an amused state, chuckling at myself and everything else in my surroundings. In no way possible does this mean I don't take this thing called life seriously. I find that for me, as I navigate these treacherous turns, steep mountains, pitfalls, traps, and free falls of existing in today's world, I need to laugh to keep from crying! We are living in strange times...I wonder if I possibly got off at the wrong stop on the choo-choo train of life...this is not the norm but a strange new breed called the new normal. Everyone is masked up — not to hide our identity and, no, not because it's Halloween. We are wearing masks because we are running scared for our lives as we watch friends, neighbors, and loved ones fall to this terrible virus. We have no opportunity for proper closure and remembrance. On top of that, we are prisoners in our own homes as we “pause” to slow the spread. I haven't put on grown-up clothes and shoes since March. I've been slopping around in tees, baggy sweats, and slides with mismatched socks, being very comfortable in what I call my “house gear”: my run-out-to-the-corner-bodega or do-laundry gear, my wash-the dog gear, my house-cleaning gear, my I-don't-need-to-get-dressed gear, my lazy-Sunday-doing-absolutely-nothing-but-reading-the-Sunday-paper-and-binge-watching gear, my completely-dressed-down gear. You get the idea, right?

Since March, I have been home, slowly melding, vegetating, and assimilating into my couch. I'm working from home, doing college from home. I sit on my couch with a wooden folding table in front of me all day and half the night breaking only for bio and those all-too-necessary Scooby

snacks and meal preparation. My TV or music is on from sunup to sundown. Fortunately, I am the type of person who can multitask as I belt out a song or watch a home renovation or cooking show. I'm connected to multiple laptops—school, work, personal—and two phones—personal and work. The couch is strewn with a combination of school stuff, work stuff, papers, mail. I'm huddled on one end moving from device to device, stirring papers around as I look for a particular piece of paper or a pen while running back-n-forth from the printer to my perch. And my whole household is home—my wife, who is doing much of the same from the bedroom and my son, also a college sophomore at BMCC come fall. Now that the semester is over, I only see him for bio and meal breaks. I have this completely irrational, yet rational, fear that he has completely fallen into his PlayStation. I find myself knocking on his door concerned that the game has indeed become real life for him, expecting to see built-up villages in his room next to the NBA 4K virtual reality basketball court! More on Him with a capital H later!

In the midst of all of this uneasiness and fervent wishes to be well and stay safe—what a phrase there!—while creating new normalcies amongst the crazy ones, my community has been struck another death blow amongst the many death knells sounding loud and clear. But what is that “community,” and what is the “culture” that produces it? Let's think about that for a minute. Some communities and cultures you are born into; some others you proudly claim as you move through life; and yet some others claim you! My culture, my community that I was born into, is the African-American community. I'm also a proud card-carrying member of the LGBTQI community, the Criminal Justice-involved community, the substance-use-and-recovery-community, the formerly-homeless community, the strong-black-woman community, the non-traditional honor college student community, the lived-experience peer-support community, the I-won't-stop-my-education-until-you-call-me-Dr. community, the house-head-until-I-die community, the entrepreneurial community, the proud-mom and first-time-Grandma community, the I-love-cruising community, the soon-to-be first-time-homeowners' community, and many others that I won't name for the sake of space but that I fiercely support and am proud of!

The community that I speak of today, the community I was born into, the African-American community, is under attack from all fronts. Not only is the African American community at the highest risk of catching and succumbing to this virulent virus, not only are our communities disproportionately at risk, not only have we suffered the highest percentage of deaths at the mercy of this pandemic, but we are still targeted and, yes, killed by white police officers for the most insignificant, not-worth-of-losing-your-life-over offenses, and, increasingly, for not having committed any offense at all. Yet another death has occurred, another black man has died on the street whispering “I can't breathe” as a white police officer knelt on his neck. What part of the game is this, I wonder? “Who does that?” I scream. What human being places a knee on another human's neck, pinning him to the ground, with a totally indifferent look on his face, for over eight minutes? Where does this funky mess happen? I'll tell you where, in the good ol' US of A, where white privilege has reigned supreme since they brought my ancestors over in chains against their will. People falsely claim this phenomenon has eased up over time only to rear its ugly head at the most inopportune of times, such as when a young black man is out buying Twizzlers and is shot dead for wearing a hoodie, or when another black man selling loosies, \$.50 untaxed cigarettes, was put in a

chokehold and originated the words “I can’t breathe.” Or when another black man goes out jogging through a neighborhood, or a young woman is killed while sitting safely and securely in her own home! I could name more names as this list goes on and on back to Emmett Till and even beyond.

Structural and institutional racism comes cloaked like a thief in the night but come it does. Whether overtly and in-your-face or undercover, it slithers all over you and grasps you hard; it knocks the breath out of your mouth and you off your feet, or for some, unfortunately, it leaves you six feet under, on the other side of the dirt, the dark side. What have we, as a people, done to you, I wonder, that you would so callously and carelessly take someone’s life just because of the color of their skin, just because your skin lacks melanin, and just because you feel you can hide behind a badge in a city you have sworn to uphold and protect? Your contract with the city includes all its denizens; your unspoken contract with the city demands that you uphold justice and fairness. Just as millennia ago Socrates understood that the city that nurtured him and fed him demanded he be just and fair in all his dealings, so we too are beholden to that unspoken contract no matter what color our skin or whose colors we wear. Strangely, or perhaps aptly, now that all hell has broken loose, now that people are protesting and, yes, looting and burning, taking a stand against injustice, I find a lot of 60s and 70s black activist lyrics on a continual loop through my mind—expressions, phrases, and bits of lyrics that say,

“Brother, brother, there’s far too many of you dying”

“To be young gifted and black”

“Say it loud – I’m black and I’m proud”

“The revolution will not be televised”

“Living for the city”

“Ball of confusion”

“Respect”

and that,

“Southern trees bear a strange fruit”

“Wake up everybody”

“Someday we’ll all be free”

“What’s going on”

“We shall overcome”

“A change is gonna come”

“Black butterfly”

“I’ll take you there”

“People get ready”

“SMH” ...

and my absolute favorite, The Negro National Anthem,

I proudly sang that song from kindergarten until the fourth grade; that’s when school restrictions were lifted in NYC and bussing in started. My mother transferred me from my neighborhood school in Hollis in Queens to a predominately white school in Bayside, and I went from walking to school to riding a school bus. Sadly, I don’t remember ever singing that song again. The irony of it all is that the very songs my parents and grandparents sang and marched to are still just as apt and relevant today. And it’s hard for me to wrap my mind around the “how comes and the whys” of it all but, yes, I know...deep down I know. I am the proud mother of four very differently gorgeous boys, and Aunty to more, and I fear for my boys...all my boys in all their different shades and hues of black manhood; I fear for their very lives because we as a people are just not safe out there anymore. My boys are at different stages in their lives; my oldest, married for ten years, out of the army for five, proud daddy of his firstborn, his son! That boy used his veteran status to build his family a house out in Maryland. I hope he remains safe in his enclave, but even that close to Washington, DC, it means nothing. My middle boy, alas, he is truly my mini-me in all areas! He looks just like me, and like me he has his challenges with the criminal justice system.

No matter how you try to protect your kids using your own life experiences as roadmaps, they will eventually fall off that trail and blaze their own, whether positive or negative. My middle boy has done just that and is currently incarcerated for a capital charge in a southern state. I fear just as much for him as I do for my sons walking the city streets free and clear because he is entangled in an unjust and oppressive system. However, he is still my child, and while he is a grown man capable of making his own life choices be them right or wrong, his mom will always be there not to administer judgment of his doings but to make sure he is treated fairly and justly in all processes. My biological youngest son is here in NY, has had his own behavioral health challenges, but has managed to overcome them. He has graduated from high school and now at twenty years old is working at Amazon and thinking on his next college moves. My youngest one is my stepson, eighteen and fresh out of high school and just completing his first year of college with me! He is my only son at home, and as such, I worry more about him traveling the highways and byways of life because he has been the most sheltered of all. He just bought a bike to have some freedom, and it broke my heart to have to tell him that, after being in the house since March going to school online, this new situation our nation is facing is making it dangerous for him to be out riding along, minding his own business. He could get trapped in a protest or something, and who knows what could happen?

I talk to all my boys about moving along this journey called life while being young black men; I emphasize the fact that respect must be shown to the boys in blue even if they are dead wrong because they do have the upper hand. No mother should have to tell her sons—sons that she wants to grow up and be strong black men—to bow down even when they are right, to concede when the odds are against them; what we should be teaching our children is to fight for what is right. How can we impart those life lessons to our children when our children are being killed in the streets by those who have sworn to protect them? How can we teach our children the ways of the world when so much is against them simply because of the color of their skin? What can I teach

my oldest one that he can then teach his son? Should I tell my grown-up son to teach his son the words of “We shall overcome” because, just as those words rang in the ears, hearts, and souls of our forefathers, they will ring for my grandson, too—along with the additional caveat of “when?” ...just as I said it...just as my parents said it...just as my sons say it...just as my grandson will eventually say it. WHEN? The cycle must be broken. What was and is should not be a “shall be” in this case. What generation will have the courage to do so? Ours? My son’s? Or my grandson’s?

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Author bio: Helen “Skip” Skipper is a Criminal Justice System survivor. As the Manager of Peer Services for the New York City Criminal Justice Agency, she is intentional about creating space for folks with lived experiences. She accomplishes this by living and breathing criminal justice reform, majoring in Criminal Justice at St. Francis College where she is a proud member of the Post-Prison program and the first student since inception to be invited into the Honors class. In 2020 Skip was accepted as a Columbia University Justice-in-Education Scholar and a Beyond-the-Bars fellow. Skip is unapologetic about her myriad lived experiences and lives by her mantra, “I’ve been around the block a time or two on my tricycle without my mommy’s permission!”

Image note: Several essays are accompanied by photographs that editor Neni Panourgiá took of flowers at Riverside Park in spring 2020. They are meant as temporal transitional points during the time that the workshop took place, from the last day on campus in the fall semester of 2019 to the last day of class in June 2020.