

2016 Mamas Day Resource: Black Mamas Matter

This year, in light of the conversations about the need to recenter Black voices and experiences, telling the stories of Black mamas in our Mother's Day worship services seems particularly meaningful and necessary. Here are two stories written by Black mamas. Dr. Janice Marie Johnson writes about how the reality of police violence and anti-Black racism affect her experience of being a mother and grandmother. Rev. Qiyamah Rahman shares a poem and prayer about how she comforts her daughter by reminding her of their ancestor's struggles for justice. Both stories call on us to reflect on how the experience of motherhood is not invented in the individual relationship between child and mama, but is passed down generation to generation.

Lessons I Never Wanted to Teach

Dr. Janice Marie Johnson, Multicultural Ministries and Leadership Director at the Unitarian Universalist Association, shared this story of mamaing in the face of police violence and anti-Black racism.

Truth be told, I grew up with no desire to be a parent. My mother was a medical professional who traveled extensively. My understanding of motherhood was, in some ways, a visit from "The Avon Lady." When she was home, we would do sophisticated things like going to shows, museums, and fine restaurants. Yet, I never had the privilege of coming home to my mother welcoming me. I never came home to her home cooking. She was the elusive, beautiful, first generation "dark-complected" success story who flitted in and out of my complex life.

I also don't recall having any desire to be married. But to my surprise—and that of many who knew me—I married Mark, my childhood sweetheart, my best friend, my heartbeat. I moved from Germany to New York City to be married. We were thrilled to welcome our daughter, Lehna, into our world. One of our first decisions as parents was to stay in the United States rather than to move to our homeland, Jamaica where life as parents would have been far easier than in The Big Apple. Both Mark and I had grown up in Jamaica. We loved our culture. We loved the notion of family being more than immediate family. We loved the respect for our ancestors, our elders, our Aunties and Uncles, our children, and our future. But we knew that if Lehna grew up to be lesbian or transgender she would not be safe in Jamaica. We didn't want her to grow up living in fear.

I sometimes think back on the decision Mark and I made and wonder if Lehna is really safer here in the United States. This past year I watched the videotape of Sandra Bland being attacked by a police officer. Watching her struggle and learning about her tragic death brought back for me all of the moments I'd spent teaching Lehna how to speak with both confidence and humility when stopped by a law enforcement agent. Speaking with confidence and humility hadn't saved Sandra. I think about all of the lessons passed down from mother to child about how to survive in this country. My own grandmother taught me to "suck salt"—when to be deferential and when to speak up for yourself when interacting with white police officers, teachers, and store keepers. I taught Lehna to keep her tote bag closed when

she walked into a store so she wouldn't be accused of stealing. These are lessons I never wanted to teach my daughter.

I didn't anticipate how motherhood would change my reactions when I saw youth and young adults of color losing their lives for breathing while Black. My heart nearly stops beating. I feel the ancestral feelings of familiar worries, and I pray that my black child will survive. I pray that no more black youth and young adults of color will be killed.

Lehna and I have journeyed together for 27 precious years. She is now the mama of my new granddaughter Simone. As I look at my beautiful daughter and granddaughter, I am struck with a longing for a world where black mamas can live free from the fear that our children will be taken from us.

It Is That Time and That Place

Qiyamah Rahman, minister of the UU Fellowship of St Croix in the Virgin Islands, shared this story of mothering. It was the inspiration for her popular poem, "It Is That Time and That Place," most recently published in the anthology ["Becoming: A Spiritual Guide for Navigating Adulthood."](#)

My daughter was in her first year of law school in 2005 and called me in the middle of the night having a meltdown. It was one of those "dark nights of the soul" that we all experience, where we imagine that everyone else is smarter and prettier with more social skills and money than we possess.

After I talked with her, reminding her of who she was and whose she was, I sat down and began to write some of what I said to her:

Now is the time to call on the memories of the ancestors who thought they -could not walk another step -toward freedom—and yet they did.

It is that time and place to call on the memories of the ancestors who, when the darkness of their lives threatened to take away the hope and light, reached a -little deeper and prayed yet another prayer.

It is that time and place to remember those who came through the long night to witness another sunrise.

It is that time and place to remember the oceans of tears shed to deliver us to this time, to remember the bent knees and bowed backs, to remember the fervent voices asking, begging and beseeching for loved ones sold off.

Time to remember their laughter and joy, though they had far less, and—little reason for optimism, yet they stayed on the path—toward a better day.

Time to hold to the steadfast hands and hearts and prayers of the ancestors that have brought us this far.

Time to make them proud and show them, and ourselves, what we are made of.

Time to show them that their prayers and sacrifices and lives were not in vain and did not go unnoticed, nor have they been forgotten.

Did you not know that this day would come?

Did you not know that we would have to change places?

Did you not know that just as our ancestors were delivered that you would also be delivered?

Have you not seen the greatness and power of the Creative Energy in the Universe called God that moves and has its being through human agency?

Have you not seen God in your neighbors' faces? In the homeless? In the battered woman? The trafficked child? The undocumented worker? The dispossessed? It is that time and that place to know that it is our turn, that we must leave a legacy for our children. And all the children.

It is that time and that place.

We are the ones we've been waiting for!

For that, let us be eternally grateful.

Amen and Blessed Be.