

Birthing you is an act of radical hope

Accepting the call to Black motherhood without averting my eyes from the spectacle of Black death

by [Jennifer Bailey](#) in the [July 28, 2021](#) issue



(Illustration © Marcela Vieira / iStock / Getty)

Dear Max,

When I was a child, your grandmother whispered the same words of love into my ear every night when I crawled into bed: “You are beautiful. You are brave. You are God’s beloved one.”

I didn't know then that these were ancient words, passed down from Black mothers to their children in slave quarters and cotton fields, shotgun houses and urban ghettos. Prophetic utterances that affirmed the humanity of Black children in a world that did not love them back. Radical words, shaped on the road between Sarah's longing and Hagar's cries for deliverance. This was a vision of the future not yet come to pass, a world in which all babies can freely dream and hope and create and wonder and live without the threat of violence looming like a thief in the night.

As I prepare to welcome you to the world, I've been thinking a lot about the Mothers of the Movement. These women are a sisterhood of sorrow, their children killed on the altar of White supremacy by vigilantes, commissioned foot soldiers of the empire, and police officers who were trained to see their babies not as human but rather as a problem which only blood sacrifice could solve.

I imagine Wanda Cooper-Jones sitting by the window, waiting for her son, Ahmaud Arbery, to come home from his run. I think of Tamika Palmer, longing to hear the voice of her baby, Breonna Taylor, one more time. If angels do indeed cry, I wonder if Mamie Till wiped the tears from Larcenia Jones Floyd's eyes as her son, George, cried out for her in his last moments.

I hope that I am never initiated into this sorority of suffering, but I recognize that in accepting the call to Black motherhood, I cannot and must not avert my eyes from the spectacle of Black death before me.

I will have to sit you down one day, my beautiful baby, and tell you that there are people in this world who will seek to kill you—not just your physical body, but your dreams. I have found that the latter can be even more dangerous than the former. One destroys only your temporal body; the other is an act of soul murder. The Bard of Harlem, Langston Hughes, said a dream deferred has the potential to “dry up like a raisin in the sun.” I promise to speak life into you against the beating drum of forces that would do your spirit harm.

There will be others who seek to define who you are, who will tell you, the mixed-race child of a Black woman and a Jewish man, that you must make certain choices about your identity. But you, my sweet love, contain multitudes. The choices are for you to explore.

Yet I do want you to know who your people are—because your lineage is a compass, a tool that can guide you when you are feeling lost and locate you in the broader

narrative of history.

You are the descendant of those who survived pogroms and concentration camps, chattel slavery, and the terrorism of Jim and Jane Crow. Your genealogy is full of stories of death and determination, pain and perseverance, sorrow and salvation, tragedy and triumph. Your body is a monument to history. In your DNA are the hidden tales of those forgotten to the great epics of antiquity and a living chronicle that charts generations of geopolitical struggle. You come from people who worked the earth in shtetlach and on tenant farms and coaxed the fruits of the harvest from barren lands. You are a part of their harvest.

I want you to know who your people are— because your lineage is a compass.

From your father, you inherit a place in the *kohanim*—the priestly caste which the Torah describes as dating back to the days of Aaron. It is a holy demarcation bound in a covenant of salt, meant to last. On the high holidays, when you come of age, you will ascend the bimah with your dad and grandfather and offer the ancient words of the Birkat Kohanim, the priestly blessing, over the congregation, offering words of protection, favor, and peace to those gathered.

In my bloodline are the Spirit-filled preachers and teachers who built their shrines to the Divine in hush harbors. They were practitioners of what Mama Ruby Sales calls Black folk religion:

It was a religion that combined the ideals of American democracy with a theological sense of justice. It was a religion that said that people who were considered property and disposable were essential in the eyes of God and even essential in a democracy, although we were enslaved. And it was a religion where the language and the symbols were accessible, that the God talk was accessible to even seven-year-olds.

As a Christian raised in the Black church, my faith is rooted in the rituals and practices of those Black mamas and church mothers whose wisdom and steadfast belief were passed to me in church kitchens and choir practices. It is the faith of generations that forms the bedrock of my own.

You will know you come from hallowed stock, so when someone tries to deny the sacredness of your life, you can declare with confidence that you know who you are.

You are the apple of God's eye.

You are being welcomed into a turbulent world. I didn't intend to give birth in the midst of a global pandemic, but here we are. COVID-19 is literally seeking to steal our breath, while the words "I can't breathe," spoken by George Floyd and Eric Garner and so many others unknown and unnamed, have become a rallying cry for racial justice. As the pandemic has devastated our communities, I have longed to hear my own mama's sweet whispered prayers again. She died four years ago on Mother's Day Eve. I miss her every day.

When I am too long in the shadow of death, I am comforted by the recent words of a mentor, who peered over the rim of her rainbow glasses to remind me that having a baby at this moment in history is an act of radical hope. *You* are an expression of radical hope. A hope born out of the possibility of what can be, rather than what it is. A future that has not come to pass.

You have already begun shaping the world by transforming the lives of those around you. In these uncertain times, the very announcement of your impending arrival is a light and respite for many thirsting to drink at the well of possibility and optimism. You have blessed us without uttering a word.

You are beautiful. You are brave. You are God's beloved one.

And we cannot wait to meet you.

With all my love,

Mama

A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title "You are God's beloved one."