

Recalling Our Roots

A Wellness Study & Podcast

- Purpose
- History
- Inspiration
- Reflection & Affirmations
- Prayers
- Gratitude



Black Heritage Month 2022

Inspired by Genesis 26

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Recalling Our Roots: A Wellness Study and Podcast

Welcome to Recalling Our Roots: A Wellness Study and Podcast. While it is not required, it is encouraged for those able to walk and/or listen to this study to do just that. Why have you been encouraged to walk and listen instead of read? How we best learn can differ by the season of life. Entering another year of pandemic perseverance calls us to bend and breathe differently. Now, more than ever, we must care for ourselves and others with wellness in mind.

The National Wellness institute defines wellness in these ways¹:

- Wellness is a conscious, self-directed and evolving process of achieving full potential
- It is a multidimensional and holistic encompassing lifestyle of mental and spiritual well-being
- It is an environment
- Wellness is positive and affirming

As we enter this time of study and reflection designed to honor Black Heritage Month, we do so with the intention of wellness. The segments of *Recalling Our Roots* speak to key attributes that serve as a foundation for discussing African American heritage. The segments also offer biblical reflection on Isaac's journey of recall found in Genesis 26.

Establishing some common understanding will help us journey well together. Most of us are formed in a Western context and educational system that centers Euro-American experiences. There are details of the past we may not know or find essential to our current daily living; however, wisdom teaches us the importance of historical knowledge when navigating life's systems with others. Before the existence of our biblical text and the barbaric legalization of chattel slavery, there were magnificent cultures thriving in numerous societies across the continent of Africa. The people in those societies and their abducted descendants were *Communal, Spiritual, Inventive, and Loved*.

Acclaimed writer Langston Hughes wrote, "My soul has grown deep like the rivers. I bathed in the Euphrates when dawns were young. I built my hut near the Congo and it lulled me to sleep. I looked upon the Nile and raised the pyramids above it. I heard the singing of the Mississippi..."

¹ National Wellness Institute, "Six Dimensions of Wellness," <https://nationalwellness.org/resources/six-dimensions-of-wellness/>.

Communal, Spiritual, Inventive, Loved

Let's talk about Communal roots...

Black scholar, Rev. Obery Hendricks, Ph.D. teaches, “Prior to the New Testament, there was no understanding of salvation that was not communal.”² People would rise and fall, thrive and perish, as a people. This is perspective-altering truth for people of faith and is also reflected in the heritage of African Americans. From prayers for rain to building homes and marriage proposals, every noble task was approached in community. We see the communal attribute still living in family reunions, funeral repasts, festivals and altar calls.

When reflecting on Black heritage, you will often hear the South African term “ubuntu.” “Ubuntu is rooted in a relational form of personhood, basically meaning that you are because of others. As a human being, you—your humanity, your personhood—you are fostered in relation to other people...It’s about coming together and building a consensus around what affects the community.”³ Individualism is a consequence of Western assimilation, foreign to African American heritage, and it stands in opposition to agape love—God’s unending love for people, through people.

Let us pause here and make a mental note of all the people we are connected to and all the people they are connected to, and how our very personhood touches family, work, school, church, neighborhood, and global communities. Can you name five people who are not biologically related to one another that remind you of “ubuntu” as a principle in your life? (Pause)



Civil Rights Activist Coretta Scott King declared, “The greatness of a community is most accurately measured by the compassionate actions of its members.”

² Obery Hendricks, “Reclaiming Our Moral Authority,” Workshop, Samuel DeWitt Proctor Conference, Norfolk, VA, February 9-12, 2015.

³ James Ogude and Stephen Paulson, “Philosophy of Ubuntu,” To the Best of Our Knowledge, Podcast, June 22, 2019, <https://www.ttbook.org/interview/i-am-because-we-are-african-philosophy-ubuntu>.

Communal, Spiritual, Inventive, Loved

Let's talk about Spiritual roots...

Starting with the first attribute—*Communal*, we move now toward the second—*Spiritual*. To fully grasp the depth of spirituality rooted and alive in Black heritage, it is good to know the communities from which most African Americans can trace some ancestry. “Senegal, Gambia, Guinea-Bissau, Mali, Angola, Congo, Democratic Republic of Congo, Gabon, Ghana, Ivory Coast, Nigeria, and Cameroon were home to most kidnapped and enslaved persons in the United States. These communal nations and their members held venerable spiritual practices, hundreds of years old.

“In ancient African religious traditions, God is both immanent and transcendent, near and far. In this framework, then, Africans engage in daily interaction with divinities, who are seen as God’s intermediaries and assistants...Another key theme in African religions is the profound respect for nature.”⁴ One can liken these traditional spiritual practices of petitioning divine rain-assistants, sun-assistants, fertility-assistants, healing-assistants, and protection-assistants to the many ways we address our God today: Rock, Healer, Strong Tower, Shelter from the Storm, Balm in Gilead, Lord of the Harvest, Lily of the Valley, Comforter, and on and on. In the lives of Black people, the fullness of God has stretched far and wide without end or barrier between human beings and nature. “The caressing of the earth with feet and hands through dance accompanied by the rhythmic syncopation of drums is a practice of both Afrikan and Native American peoples. Traditional Black churches participate in the rhythmic beat of gospel music to celebrate God who is Spirit and who lives in the hands, heart, feet, and minds of the people.”⁵

In her book *Making A Way Out of No Way*, Theologian Dr. Monica Coleman encourages, “We are called to remember our past and incorporate it into our process of becoming. As we do so, we can use past survival techniques to help ourselves live into the future. We can also remember the destructive death-dealing aspects of the past and vow not to repeat them.”⁶

Genesis 26:18 reads, “Isaac dug again the wells of water that had been dug in the days of his father Abraham; for the Philistines had stopped them up after the death of Abraham; and he gave them the names that his father had given them.”

⁴ Maulana Karenga, *Introduction to Black Studies*, 2nd ed., (Los Angeles: University of Sankore Press, 1993), 213.

⁵ Karen Baker-Fletcher and Garth Kasimu Baker-Fletcher, *My Sister My Brother: Womanist and Xodus God Talk* (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2002), 189.

⁶ Monica Coleman, *Making a Way Out of No Way*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008), 101.

A poem for us...

I See the Rhythm of the Gospel

*I see the rhythm in the sanctified churches
Of black folk who flock to the pews
After days of doing hard jobs white folks don't want to do.
Every Sunday morning, in the California heat,
I follow the grown-ups down to meet
All the friends and neighbors hurrying to get a seat
At Azusa Street.
There I watch as Pastor Seymour preaches and beseeches us to feel the spirit.
Then, one by one, the grown-ups stand and testify about His commands.
Their bodies shake, their voices lift and shout.
I get a little nervous as I look about and see
The people I know move in some strange dance,
Speaking in tongues, falling in a trance...
"Amen!" the preacher yells.
"Amen!" we say.
"Hallelujah!"
"Hallelujah!"
This goes on all day,
Until, one by one, they each surrender
To experience some ecstatic splendor
That leaves them refreshed and soft and tender
Ready to start a new week.
I see the rhythm at Azusa Street,
When the spirit rises and starts to speak.⁷*

Written by: Toyomi Igus

⁷ Toyomi Igus, *I See the Rhythm of the Gospel* (Grand Rapids: Zonderkidz, 2010), 16.

Communal, Spiritual, Inventive, Loved

Let's talk about Inventive roots...

As we heard earlier, this podcast was inspired by Genesis 26. In that text, Isaac faced personal and communal crisis. Because he had come from another place, because he had been resourceful in growing his community and developing their own essential goods, because he and his people were no longer beholden to the Philistines, he was envied and resented. King Abimelech of the Philistines ordered Isaac and his people to leave, so they left. They found themselves in a valley, and while in that valley, Isaac remembered what his ancestor had left behind—water wells. He dug up the wells his father had established. Afterwards, God encouraged him not to be afraid, but to be assured of God's presence and blessings. In response to being in God's presence, Isaac built an altar and dug some more. Recalling his roots restored him.

To be *Inventive* is to be creative-- to establish something new or from a new approach. It is to consider a need or desire and harness what is available and necessary to meet the need. To be *Inventive* is to repurpose, on purpose. Black heritage is saturated in this way. Consider a people, denied nearly every aspect of wellness, who have recreated environments, a spirituality, and affirming words for themselves. During Black Heritage Month, it is typical for households, churches, and schools to celebrate the many tangible inventions of African Americans. Nonetheless, it is wholesome to regard African Americans' resolve to re-invent safety, worship, education, recipes, jargon and communal economies having been stripped of their languages, family systems, income, and freedom. This truth is nothing short of miraculous. It is the frustration and ultimate rebuke of white supremacy culture.

"Before the Civil War, Black inventions were hardly recognized or known due to the fact that enslaved Africans could not patent their inventions. By 1913, Blacks had patented an estimated one thousand inventions, especially in the fields of electricity, transportation and industrial machinery, and the records showed that more than twenty of those approximately 190 Black inventors were Black women."⁸ U.S. industrialization was born of African American labor. There is a debt owed and the pursuit of wellness has not permitted Black folk to wait for payment.

The extraordinary Harriet Tubman reminded us, "Every great dream begins with a dreamer."

⁸ Karenga, 161.

Communal, Spiritual, Inventive and Loved: Then, Now, and Always

Hear now, these testimonies of love written in song...

“The moment I wake up, before I put on my makeup, I say a little prayer for you. And while combing my hair now, wondering what dress to wear now, I say a little prayer for you. You'll stay in my heart and I will love you forever and ever. We never will part, oh, how I love you. Together, together”

That's Aretha Franklin singing about love in 1968.

There ain't no mountain high enough ain't no valley low enough, ain't no river wide enough to keep me from getting to you. I set you free. I told you, you can always count on me. From that day on I made a vow, I'll be there when you want me, some way, somehow. 'Cause baby, there ain't no mountain high enough.

That's Marvin Gaye singing about love in 1967.

Love also lived in African American spirituals...

All night, all day, angels watching over me, my Lord.

All night, all day, angels watching over me.

Remember?

There is a balm in Gilead, to make the wounded whole.

Or how about... Didn't my Lord deliver Daniel, and why not every man. He delivered Daniel from the lion's den, Jonah from the belly of the whale, and the Hebrew children from the fiery furnace. Why not every man?

Let us not forget Curtis Mayfield's movement song of 1965...

People get ready. There's a train a comin'. You don't need no baggage; you just get on board. All you need is faith to hear the diesels hummin'. You don't need no ticket, just thank the Lord. So people get ready. There's a train to Jordan, picking up passengers coast to coast. Faith is the key. Open the doors and board them. There's hope for all among those loved the most.

Finally, in the intimacy of Psalm 139, David shares,

O Lord, you have searched me and known me.

2 You know when I sit down and when I rise up;
you discern my thoughts from far away.

3 You search out my path and my lying down,
and are acquainted with all my ways.

4 Even before a word is on my tongue,
O Lord, you know it completely.

5 You hem me in, behind and before,
and lay your hand upon me.

6 Such knowledge is too wonderful for me;
it is so high that I cannot attain it.

7 Where can I go from your spirit?
Or where can I flee from your presence?

8 If I ascend to heaven, you are there;
if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there.

9 If I take the wings of the morning
and settle at the farthest limits of the sea,
10 even there your hand shall lead me,
and your right hand shall hold me fast.

11 If I say, "Surely the darkness shall cover me,
and the light around me become night,"
12 even the darkness is not dark to you;
the night is as bright as the day,
for darkness is as light to you.

13 For it was you who formed my inward parts;
you knit me together in my mother's womb.

14 I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made.
Wonderful are your works;
that I know very well.

15 My frame was not hidden from you,
when I was being made in secret,
intricately woven in the depths of the earth.

16 Your eyes beheld my unformed substance.
In your book were written
all the days that were formed for me,
when none of them as yet existed.

17 How weighty to me are your thoughts, O God!
How vast is the sum of them!

18 I try to count them—they are more than the sand;
I come to the end—I am still with you.

Friends and Family, to be known by God this way is to be *Loved*. It nurtures our wellness to trace the pathways of love. To recall what is good and lasting is to create a mental environment that is positive and affirming. As we learned in the beginning, “Wellness is a conscious, self-directed process.” We are surrounded by such an abundance of love that we look past it. We miss its disclosure looking for it in limited forms. Love is immeasurable, unbound. We even experience love in the sound of the drum. It has remained with us for centuries. Sometimes a beat can transport our spirits to a place of ancestral memory, and comfort us in ways a sermon cannot. Ta-Nehisi (ta-na-ha-see) Coates recalls the impact of the drum in his memoir *The Beautiful Struggle*. “From a slap to a deep tonal moan, and barely audible bass, the drum had a sharp, piercing sound, and followed the heartbeat...When you tapped it, the chained undead wailed out from the Atlantic.”⁹

From the time of birth in West African naming ceremonies, Black heritage gives witness to love. “In a world where even the act of speaking is infused with power, birth names—whether protective or emboldening, proverbial or predictive, exalted or even seemingly indelicate—are of the highest traditional significance...A name creates an expectation and an attitude in those that hear it, even before they meet the name-bearer.”¹⁰ Think for a moment, who says your name in such a way that the sound of them saying it makes you feel loved? (pause)

Offer thanks for those people, their love, and the love that lives in your name. I’ll wait. (pause)

Now that you have reflected on the love in your earthly name, consider what God’s love calls you:

- Child
- Friend
- Alive
- New
- Healed
- Free

Let’s really allow God’s naming love to penetrate our hearts, minds, and spirits in the building of wellness. (pause) God calls me Child. God calls me Friend. God calls me Alive. God calls me New. God calls me Healed. God calls me Free.

⁹ Ta-Nehisi Coates, *The Beautiful Struggle* (New York: Spiegel & Grau, 2009), 148-9, 192.

¹⁰ Mia Sogoba, “The Power of a Name,” *Cultures of West Africa*, February 11, 2019, www.culturesofwestafrica.com/power-of-names/.

Recalling Our Roots

It's reflection time...

In his book *Rethinking Black History*, Sociologist Orlando Patterson explains the three ways Black history is viewed: catastrophic, contributionism, and survivalist.¹¹ He made this claim in the 70s and it has remained widely true. These approaches to Black history may lead some to believe African Americans have something to prove—a humanity to justify. “Hate gives identity”¹², but it must not sustain it. For this reason, our podcast seeks to reach beyond what has happened to Black people, what Black people have produced for others, and how Black people have survived unimaginable terror. *Recalling Our Roots* seeks to foster wellness grounded in African Americans’ heritage as a people who have been and remain *Communal, Spiritual, Inventive, and Loved*.

Let us begin our reflection time from a mental space of affirmation with nothing to prove. We have been connected to everything we need. Together, we can pause and say that out loud.

WE HAVE BEEN CONNECTED TO EVERYTHING WE NEED.

(Pause)

Now, let’s personalize that affirmation and say together:

I AM CONNECTED TO EVERYTHING I NEED.

(Pause)

This is not a lofty affirmation, but it is a full and conclusive assessment of what it means to be from and in a community. It reflects a healthy understanding of togetherness that reaches beyond the comforts of our home to a BEFORE. It is an affirmation held up together by the divine breadth of communal, spiritual, inventive, and loving resources we have within our reach. Now, let’s say it again.

I AM CONNECTED TO EVERYTHING I NEED.

The things we need most are found in community, in the Holy Spirit, in Creation, and in love. They are found in our roots. We need only to revisit them in quietness with a discerning spirit. Think of your mother figures, father figures, aunties, church mothers, elders and all those who have poured into your life. Recall your roots. Communal...Spiritual...Inventive... and Loved.

¹¹ Orlando Patterson, “Rethinking Black History,” *Harvard Educational Review* 41 (1971), 29-31.

¹² Ta-Neheisi Coates, *Between The World And Me* (New York: Spiegel and Grau, 2015), 60.

Praying with the Ancestors

Walking as one accompanied by God and the great cloud of witnesses, join now in prayer with our ancestors in their own words.

Howard Thurman prayed,
“Open unto me, light for my darkness
Open unto me, courage for my fear
Open unto me, hope for my despair
Open unto me, peace for my turmoil
Open unto me, joy for my sorrow
Open unto me, strength for my weakness
Open unto me, wisdom for my confusion
Open unto me, forgiveness for my sins
Open unto me, tenderness for my toughness
Open unto me, love for my hates
Open unto me, Thy Self for myself
Lord, Lord, open unto me!”

Sojourner Truth prayed,
“Do It For Me God
God, you know I have no money, but you can make the
people do for me, and you must make the people do for me. I will
never give you peace till you do, God.”

Maya Angelou prayed,
“Dear Creator, You, the borderless sea of substance,
We ask you to give to all the world that which we need most—Peace.”

W.E.B. DuBois prayed,
“Give us grace, O God, to dare to do the deed which we well know
cries to be done. Let us not hesitate because of ease, or the
words of men’s mouths, or our own lives. Mighty causes are
calling us—the freeing of women, the training of children, the
putting down of hate and murder and poverty—all these and
more. But they call with voices that mean work and sacrifices
and death. Mercifully grant us, O God, the spirit of Esther, that
we say: I will go unto the King and if I perish, I perish.”

Paul Laurence Dunbar prayed,
“O’ Lord, the hard-won miles have worn my stumbling feet:
Oh, soothe me with thy smiles, and make my life complete.
The thorns were thick and keen where’er I trembling trod;
The way was long between my wounded feet and God.
Where healing waters flow do though my footsteps lead.
My heart is aching so; Thy gracious balm I need.”

Harriet Tubman prayed,
“Oh, Lord! You’ve been with me in six troubles. Don’t desert me in the seventh.”

James Weldon Johnson prayed,
“God of our weary years, God of our silent tears,
Thou who has brought us thus far on the way;
Thou who has by Thy might, led us into the light,
Keep us forever in the path, we pray.
Lest our feet stray from the places, our God, where we met Thee,
Lest our hearts drunk with the wine of the world, we forget Thee;
Shadowed beneath Thy hand, may we forever stand,
True to our God, true to our native land.”¹³

Barbara Jordan prayed,
“Since you can do all that we cannot do,
give us the good sense to work with You in partnership for the benefit of all humankind.
Help us to resist our inclination to be the senior partner, as we work together,
keep talking to us and help us to listen.
Guide us in our decisions and grant us the wisdom, courage, and selflessness
to discern the difference between good and bad, fact and fiction, reality and illusion.”¹⁴

Jesus prayed in John 17:13-15,
“I am coming to you, and I speak these things in the world so that they may have my joy made complete
IN THEMSELVES. I have given them your word, and the world has hated them because they do not
belong to this world, just as I do not belong to the world. I am not asking you to take them out of the
world, but I ask you to protect them from the evil one.”

¹³ James Weldon Johnson and J. Rosamond Johnson, “Lift Every Voice and Sing,” 1917.

¹⁴ Barbara Jordan, “National Prayer Breakfast,” Washington, D.C., February 2, 1978,
<http://texashistory.unt.edu/ark:/67531/metaph611355/>.

Learning from Isaac

Wellness is a plan...

Together, we have remembered a strong foundation upon which our wellness can stand. Health Practitioner Katie Mason shared with *Psychology Today*, "Wellness plans review exercise habits, dietary choices, lifestyle factors, environmental factors, physical health problems, personal beliefs about the self, interpersonal relationships, spirituality, and trauma history."¹⁵

In Genesis 26, Isaac performed some key steps of his own in wellness planning.

- He listened to and for God.
- He planted seed.
- He did not stay where he was not welcome.
- He recalled what his forebearer had built before him.
- He accessed his tangible, life-giving heritage.
- He acknowledged God's presence in his life.
- He did not blindly trust those who had betrayed him.
- He forgave.

Planning our wellness is a communal, spiritual, inventive, and loving act. It is a form of resistance to oppressive forces that cause us to believe we are not worthy, there is not enough time in the day, or that we must accept disregard as status quo. When we plan to live well, we align with God's heart and mind. When we plan to live well, we reach much further back than anything that has ever happened to us and we recall our roots of thriving. We recall Psalm 139. We acknowledge God's presence as our before and our always.

What would wake-up wellness look like in your mornings? Is there a YouTube video or a song to play in the bathroom as you prepare for the day? Is there a candle you can light to celebrate your memories of Grandmama? Is there a meal you can make once a month for friends to remind yourself and them of community? Are there goodbyes to offer, blocks in your phone to be made, or folk to unfollow on social media? Wellness is a plan. Say that with me....

WELLNESS IS A PLAN.

¹⁵ Kari Kusnak, "Setting Wellness Resolutions," January 3, 2021, <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/happy-healthy-relationships/202101/setting-wellness-resolutions>.

Celebrate Your Roots, Celebrate You

Let's close with joy...

At the end of Genesis 26, a member of Isaac's community shouted and celebrated the discovery of water. It is our hope that you have enjoyed your walk with *Recalling Our Roots*, remembered the beauty in your heritage, and also in African American heritage. It is our greatest hope that you have discovered water! And if you have discovered water, then WADE IN IT! "WADE IN THE WATER."

Wade in the water until freedom calls, just as it did many an African American ancestor. We have historical models of persisting and audacious joy. There are folk, alive and gone, who by their life's witness bring forward joy in our hearts and minds. Alice Walker wrote, "The absence of models, in literature as in life, is an occupational hazard for the artist, simply because models in art, in behavior, in growth of spirit and intellect—even if rejected—enrich and enlarge one's view of existence."¹⁶ To know others have felt what we feel, have carried what we carry and have needed the things we need is a comfort. It is easier to be human when we have Wisdom that cautions against trying life alone. There is joy inside of us, outside of us, behind us, and still ahead.

Can you name memories of joy? (pause)

Can you name current sources of joy? (pause)

Can you say how you will foster joy for yourself and others?

Renowned choreographer Alvin Ailey reflected, "The American Negro—sometimes sorrowing, sometimes jubilant but always hopeful—has touched, illuminated, and influenced the most remote preserves of world civilization. I and my dance theater celebrate this trembling beauty."

We join ancestor Alvin Ailey in celebration and offer thanks for the many rich sources you have heard from in this podcast. In a final communal, spiritual, inventive and loving expression, we speak their names.

¹⁶ Alice Walker, *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1983), 4.

The Holy Spirit
Isaac, Son of Sarai and Abraham
Jesus, Our Liberator
The Holy Spirit
Coretta Scott King
Obery Hendricks, "Reclaiming Our Moral Authority," Samuel DeWitt Proctor Conference, 2015.
James Ogude and Stephen Paulson, "Philosophy of Ubuntu," To the Best of Our Knowledge Podcast
Maulana Karenga, Introduction to Black Studies, 2nd ed.
Karen Baker-Fletcher & Garth Kasimu Baker-Fletcher, My Sister My Brother: Womanist & Xodus God Talk
Monica Coleman, Making a Way Out of No Way
Toyomi Igus, I See the Rhythm of the Gospel
Harriet Tubman
Aretha Franklin
Marvin Gaye
Curtis Mayfield
The Ancestors
King David, Psalm 139
Ta-Nehisi Coates, The Beautiful Struggle
Mia Sogoba, "The Power of a Name," Cultures of West Africa
Orlando Patterson, "Rethinking Black History," Harvard Educational Review
Ta-Neheisi Coates, Between The World And Me
Howard Thurman
Sojourner Truth
Maya Angelou
W.E.B. Du Bois
James Weldon Johnson and J. Rosamond Johnson, "Lift Every Voice and Sing"
Congresswoman Barbara Jordan, "National Prayer Breakfast," Washington, D.C., 1978
Kari Kusnak, "Setting Wellness Resolutions," Psychology Today
Alice Walker, In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens
Alvin Ailey, Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater

All footnotes are available online in a downloadable written transcript. Thank you for recalling roots with me. May your spirit be refreshed. Let us pray... We slow our breathing and clear our minds of everything, but gratitude. For you, God, have been with us. You have spoken to us in whispers, moans, and giggles. You have given brilliant light where we may have resolved to accept shadows. Your love informs are being. We do not have to prove our beginnings or our worth. Your love justifies us over and over again. God, thank you for roots that give us life anew! Amen and Asé.

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