

The New Saints

From Broken Hearts
to Spiritual Warriors

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Contents

Prologue | 1

The New Saint: An Introduction 7
The Profound Paths of Werk and Work 37
Getting Free 55
Awakened Care 85
The Four Sweet Liberations 123
The Care of Home 137
Prayer 141
Working with the Ancestors 151
Touching the Earth 165
The Body 179
Loving God 197
Surrendering to the Dark 221
Forgiveness 229
Letting Go of the Lover I Used to Be 241
Karmapa, Think of Me 253
Epilogue 267
<hr/>
Acknowledgments 271
About the Author 275

Prologue

The old saying is true: freaks come out at night. Since I am half freak (on my mother's side), I journey outside to see what trouble there is for me to get into.

I find myself sitting on my front porch. The land is grateful for my company. The street hushes itself into silence while people settle into sleep, journeying into the realms their needs take them. I take out my pipe along with the tobacco the medicine men told me to grow in my backyard.

I listen to the land whisper bedtime stories. Across the street, a giant magnolia tree towers over the block. Though ignored and misunderstood, it is an ancient spirit guarding the land and its people. It reminds me of age and history, of change and death. My Indigenous elders honor Elder Magnolia and ask me to continue to do the same. From my porch, while staring up into its branches, moon and starlight streaming through its leaves, I ask it questions. It reminds me of the great tree Yggdrasil from Norse mythology, which is said to bind all the worlds together. I am left in silent awe, considering that Elder Magnolia may bind so much existence together.

I light the tobacco and inhale deeply, connecting to the elements of earth and fire, opening to the consciousness of the tobacco and inhaling the energy of gratitude and remembrance in with the smoke: gratitude for the land that has held so much violence and remembrance of the Cherokee, Creek, and Muscogee people who were forced off this land and of my ancestors who were forced to work it, gratitude for the night and its kindness and stillness, and gratitude for all the beings of the unseen world who care for us in this community. I exhale and watch the thick white plumes of

smoke hover in front of me before lifting and scattering upward, dissolving into the spirit realm where they will take my gratitude.

In the distance, the siren of a fire truck, dispatched from the station a few blocks up, slices through the stillness of this midnight ceremony. I stop what I'm doing to offer prayers for the people these emergency vehicles are going to help.

On nights like this I tend to make sure I am who I pretend to be by recalling myself as if ticking off a checklist: I am a Black queer middle-aged man, six foot four, two hundred and something pounds (a lady does not disclose her weight!), with broad shoulders, eyes like dark brown pools, thick lips, a wide nose, and a shaved head with a healthy, thick beard spotted with patches of gray. I haven't decided if I am handsome or sexy and maybe that doesn't matter. What I know is that I am moving quickly into my elder years, the same years that many gay and queer men of the generation before me never made it to. I am grateful that I survived, though I mourn for those who did not make it. I offer smoke for those beautiful ones as well.

During my college years I gave myself the nickname Slick Hot Chocolate Rod—melts in your mouth, not in your hand. (Actually, I considered the name to be much grander, like a sobriquet with user instructions attached.) Although in my mind the nickname was quite accurate, it did not survive my early twenties.

These days, although I fantasize about going out to the clubs or having random hookups and engaging in wild, uninhibited group sex, there is nothing more exciting than a nice quiet dinner, a glass of sweet red wine, a few episodes of *The Golden Girls*, and a late-night pipe of tobacco. Sometimes I think I am a modern-day hobbit.

I am also a holy man or, more precisely, a lama—a Tibetan Buddhist title I earned after spending a little over three years in silent, cloistered retreat. *Lama* means “teacher” but carries the connotation of spiritual heaviness, a profound gravitas. Supposedly, I am heavy with spiritual realization. When I tell people I am a lama, they ask, “Oh, like the animal?” In my mind, I respond, *No, like fuck you*. Maybe this response, though not voiced, isn't so spiritual.

Before I earned my gravitas, I was an activist, living in an intentional community, trying to do what Jesus did—feeding folks, trying to stop wars, and struggling to educate people about systems of violence—while at the same time being young and idealistic and doing my best to have fun and drink all the drinks, laugh all the laughs, kiss all the boys, go to all the parties, and, most importantly, experience all the drama. It was a busy time that was interrupted by a sudden emotional crash into hopelessness followed by the calling of the holy Buddhist life.

Back on the porch, my headphones have made their way to my ears. Sister Rosetta Tharpe is singing “Precious Memories” to me in her heavy, bluesy belt that wears the mask of traditional gospel but underneath carries the hard thump of rock ‘n’ roll. My own precious memories flood my soul and threaten to trap me back in a time when everything seemed simpler and easier.

When I pay attention, I notice that my neighborhood is full of many things, including the ghosts of dead Confederate soldiers lumbering up and down the street. Their roaming is aimless, slow, and melancholic. I am not afraid. I’m pissed off. I remind them that they gave their lives for a stupid, vile cause, and that they can go to hell. But eventually I remember what a good Buddhist is supposed to do, and I offer prayers that they be released from being earth-bound. I offer them smoke from my pipe. Some of them appreciate it and begin to huddle on the sidewalk in front of me. They cannot come closer without an invitation from me, and I do not invite them. The only way I survive both the physical and spirit worlds is by saying no.

I wonder what it is like for them to be stuck in a world that has no more use for them, to be rendered illusions or figments of an overactive imagination. I wonder what it is like to give your life to something, only to be forgotten, and for houses to be built on top of your unmarked grave. I wonder about the twin brutalities of desecration and erasure. I begin to feel sorry for them. Suddenly, I begin to feel sorry for myself, as I realize that I have been reflecting on my own plight and that of my ancestors the whole time.

All this reminds me of how lonely I have been all my life. I have dwelled so deeply inside of myself and developed such a decadent spiritual life that most people can't begin to relate to me. And because of this decadence, I have developed the capacity to see and experience the complexity of people as well as the world we have created. My loneliness stems from not being able to articulate everything I experience to others because they have not developed the same capacity to understand this complexity. So, often I choose to keep these experiences to myself and pretend the world is as simple as people think it is.

I haven't been sleeping well the past few nights. Sometimes, I feel as if I am the only person in the world exhausted from navigating an ocean of trauma and grief that mostly isn't mine. But so many people are drowning in this ocean. They normalize the experience and call it life.

I have two recurring dreams. The first is about shopping at Target. This is a dream I make a reality as often as possible. The second recurring dream is about zombies. I find myself in the middle of a zombie apocalypse, trying to help people get to safety, which often means hiding in abandoned buildings or around corners as undead mobs mill about. Although this sounds like a nightmare, I am never frightened. I always know that the zombies are metaphors for how we move through the world: extremely disassociated from our lived experience of suffering and struggle. Our hiding in the dream echoes our hiding from the grief and trauma we don't know how to tend to.

Things are falling apart. I am being called into the dense confusion of people and the world our confusion has created. All around us the loud, violent clamoring of histories refusing to be settled distracts us. Light and dark maintain a precarious balance. The wind carries troubling news from other realms of existence, and the earth is foretelling a hard winter. However, ancient, powerful magic is awakening, forgotten gods are returning, and people are being shaken awake and directed to the front lines to fight. The world is still full of potential, and it is from this potential that I offer what I can now.

I have finished my pipe and said all my prayers, and I feel complete for the night. I leave a final offering of grains, water, light, and incense on the porch as a bribe for those beings who may be pissed at me, hoping they accept this offering instead of fucking with me.

The New Saint

An Introduction

I am a New Saint. (I am also a queen. However, that may be subject matter for another book!) Traditionally, people do not ordain themselves saints unless they are leaders of a cult. Whether or not someone is a saint (or cult leader) is up to others to discern. In the case of a saint, a spiritual community recognizes the divine qualities of a person and their extraordinary activities, usually after their death. Cult members are not so good at recognizing that they are in a cult or that they have a cult leader. Those labels are applied by others outside of the cult, who are actually members of larger cults that have become mainstreamed and normalized, like academic institutions, pop star fan/stan communities, political parties, royal families, or our favorite online retailers whose products magically appear on our doorstep when we press a button on an app.

This is not a book about cults . . . yet.

I am not a New Saint because I feel divine or extraordinary. I am a New Saint because I have chosen to give a shit about myself and everyone around me and because I have figured out much of the work I need to do to help people experience the freedom to be their most authentic selves, I do that work, and I keep showing up to do that work. This may sound extraordinary, but I don't want it to be because I need you to join me on this path. We no longer have a choice. I want you to become a New Saint so that we can together make this work ordinary and accessible. Just as many of us are trained to do simple tasks to function in our lives, I want us

to train to free each other from suffering while we train to reduce our own suffering.

This book is about how to do that. But first I should explain where the notion of New Saints came from.

The Apocalypse

Let's start with something fun and light, like the apocalypse.

To begin with, we are not experiencing the end of the world, but we are experiencing the end of some provocative and desperately enduring lies we have told ourselves. With the end of lies comes the awakening of truth. And so we are living in a period when we are confronting truth—truth about ourselves and our relationship to death and dying, to systems and institutions of violence, to trans-historical trauma, to the health of our planet, to capitalism, and, ultimately, to the fact that we can no longer continue living like we have in the past. Real truth is unrelenting, like the sun piercing the clouds on an overcast day, and it doesn't go away just because we can't handle it. Truth uncovers everything—all the shit that we have spent our lives running away from. And when something is uncovered, even if it's the most intense individual or collective trauma, it demands to be taken care of.

Although the apocalypse can be defined as unveiling and truth telling, it is perhaps experienced by many of us as an invasive anxiety, worry, fear, or even terror. This anxiety can be so intense that we don't even experience it as anxiety, either because we have become disassociated (our nervous system has shut down our capacity to feel because the sensation is too intense for us to process) or because the energy of the anxiety is manifesting as another sensation, like physical pain, fatigue, anger, or sadness.

For me, living through the apocalypse feels like trying to stand on ground that is constantly shifting, like making plans for tomorrow while having little faith that there will be a tomorrow. It is the feeling of the bottom falling out from under me. It is struggling to deal with the great Buddhist law of impermanence, which teaches

that everything is always changing and in flux. Impermanence is sometimes excruciating if you, like me, are addicted to stability.

The apocalypse has been happening for a long time, and it started well before the death of Prince and Betty White, the emergence of the coronavirus and its subsequent quarantine, the election of Donald Trump, the January 6 insurrection, Brexit, 9/11, the Newtown and Columbine shootings, the AIDS epidemic, the destruction of the Greenwood Community, or the Holocaust and WWII. Maybe it started when Portuguese sailors reached the coast of Ghana or when Christopher Columbus landed in the Caribbean and my ancestors were later enslaved or with the genocide and relocation of Indigenous peoples all over the world or further back than that with the Spanish Inquisition or the Crusades. Maybe the apocalypse started with the evolution of race into hierarchies of power, with whiteness as the expression of a moral attitude that came to violently repress all other racial groups. Or perhaps the apocalypse began with the transition into modernity, from the agricultural age to the industrial revolution, or even with the violent patrilineal overthrow of matrilineal cultures in the Indus Valley civilizations. Perhaps it started in the Garden of Eden when the forbidden fruit was eaten. My own practices and beliefs suggest that it may have begun when we forgot we were expressions of the Divine and started identifying with the pain of separateness and began feeling overwhelmed by the delusion.

Regardless of when the apocalypse started, we are knee deep in it now! And it may be strange to read this, but I believe the apocalypse is a blessing. There's nothing like a crisis to wake us up and force us to start getting serious about change.

A New Age and New Saints

That the days are becoming indistinguishable from each other is a sign of eternity. The new world isn't that of waiting for the old order to reopen or the old economy to restart. It's to realize that the Messianic Age begins when we see that the essential labor is to love and feed each other and to revel in the feeling of endless resurrection when we wake up and have nothing to do that we don't have to do unless we choose it and choose it in love.

—Carrie Sealine

I have often noticed that those who are loudest about how we are doomed are those who have never had to struggle in collective survival. I am not glorifying descending from communities that have had to survive systems created to annihilate us, because the transgenerational trauma has been heavy. When you or your community have not known this struggle, chances are you will not know or embody resilience. You will not understand how important and powerful collective cooperation and care can be. Those of us who are descendants of people who have survived slavery, genocide, wars, plagues, or any expression of warfare carry the seeds of survival in our DNA. We harbor ancestral memories of what it has meant for our people to make a way out of no way. My ancestry has taught me to look deeply into this period and understand that there is potential for not just surviving but flourishing.

In one of his most famous poems, “The Second Coming,” W. B. Yeats wrote, “The best lack all conviction, while the worst / Are full of passionate intensity.” To meet the apocalypse, you must embody an intention that this experience will not consume you, that this experience is calling you into a deeper labor of transformation and creativity. There are so many people full of “passionate intensity,” but this passion is actually intense reactivity to the fear of being

consumed as well as to the helplessness we feel confronting something that cannot be organized or bypassed.

Carrie Sealine, a Jewish mystic, scholar, and practitioner of Thelema, an esoteric religious tradition founded by Aleister Crowley, was the first person who offered me a beautiful and generative vision of what the ongoing apocalypse was opening into. As is often the case with people who become my teachers, I never knew of Carrie Sealine until very shortly after her passing in 2020, when a close mutual friend sent me some of her work. I was moved by how she spoke of the days blending into one another and about reveling in eternity, which is a revelation expressed first in my life by our great pop philosopher Lauryn Hill when she said that everything was everything to my generation.

Carrie speaks of the need not to return to our old ways but to expand bravely into the age that is coming, the Messianic Age, or the Golden Age, when we will experience universal peace. I understand peace as the embodiment of the abolitionist dream of a world grounded in personal freedom, collective care, conflicts held in love, and communities where we live in the truth of things held in compassion, as opposed to in avoidance of the violence of our past and present.

Listening to Carrie, I was reminded of the great Indian guru Neem Karoli Baba (or Maharaji), who during the height of his teaching life in the mid-1900s taught, “Love everyone, serve everyone, remember God, and tell the truth.” The Messianic Age will be as Carrie envisioned: a time when we must love everyone. This is the essential labor that Maharaji taught as well: to just love and be loved, to feed and allow yourself to be fed, to do what is only done out of love, and to embrace the imperative labor of resting as taught by my sister and comrade Tricia Hersey, the founder and bishop of the Nap Ministry. This is what the rebalancing work of the apocalypse is propelling us toward: a life where the concept of labor is not linked to capitalist production and consumption but to the essential well-being of our hearts, minds, and bodies, where we will know how to choose love over resentment, rest over exhaustion, silence over noise, and stillness over busyness.

The present apocalypse is one thing that has awakened this new path of sainthood for me. The other was getting sick and tired of performative goodness.

Faking It

I have only seen a few seconds of the video of George Floyd being slowly murdered, but it was enough to remind me again that America does not love Black people. The murder of George Floyd ignited a renewed movement for Black lives that saw mass marches and actions not just in the country but around the world. Not only were many of us on the streets, but we were also reeducating ourselves. The quarantine went from an opportunity to explore baking bread and making cakes to learning Marxist theory and becoming abolitionist scholars wanting to defund the police.

On social media, White people were falling over themselves to promote and throw money at Black activists, healers, and scholars, while posting their hot takes and Black Lives Matter memes and calling other White people out. I lost count of how many “you need to follow this Black person now!” lists I was on. On Instagram, I shot up to forty thousand followers from barely six thousand, which was weird for someone like me, who has a strong dislike of social media outside of sharing humorous memes and staying connected to friends and family.

After Floyd’s murder, my book *Love and Rage*, which explored anger and its vital role in healing and justice work, was published. It became popular due to its timeliness, and I found myself featured in major publications like the *Washington Post*, educating folks on the need for engaged, compassionate social action that embraces the power of anger while acknowledging our broken hearts.

But something was bothering me. So much of the activity on social media felt performative. It felt like White people were trying to look good and in doing so were desperate to feel good about their unwillingness to do the serious labor of disrupting white supremacy. None of these performative acts, such as posting black squares