

EVOLVING WHILE BLACK

The Ultimate Guide to
Happiness & Transformation
on Your Own Terms

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INTRODUCTION

Black people don't do stuff like this was the first thought that echoed in my mind as I looked at my Groupon receipt for a tandem skydiving jump. My second thought was, *I am not telling Ann Lomax about this until after my feet touch God's green earth.* And guess what? I did not!

Many years ago, I was sitting at work checking my personal email (y'all know some of us like to take a mental health break in the middle of a workday; it's called balance) and came across an email that would forever change my life. The email subject read, "Face Your Fears with This New Groupon Deal for Skydiving!" Face your fears? *Um, hello, Universe? Stay out of my business.* I'm a firm believer in God winks, and clearly there were some things that God knew I needed to sort out. So I decided to take the hint and purchase the deal, but not before I called my partner-in-foolishness, Tomara (also known as Tomkins), and convinced her to take the jump with me.

On a random Saturday morning in the fall, we made the drive down to a small airport in Warrenton, Virginia. We pulled up to the address from my Groupon and found two large barns, a medium-sized plane, and a tiny plane not too far from it.

As we signed in for our pre-jump training, Tomkins asked the receptionist, "Where is the plane we'll be jumping from today?"

The lady grinned and said, "Oh, that small one over there, sweetie."

Tomkins took one look at the plane, then looked at me and said, "Giiirrrl, I'll see you when you land."

Ma'am! I stood there in disbelief, but quickly got over it as it was my idea to jump out of a plane in the first place. I couldn't hold it against her. My mind, on the other hand, was made up. I didn't drive down those country roads for nothing! I walked up to the registration window, signed my name on the "If you die, it's not our fault" waiver, then introduced myself to my assigned tandem instructor—a tall, handsome man named Inan. He was a cool-looking man with dyed hair and an amazing accent—the perfect cheerleader, bursting with smiles and *tons* of energy while we waited for our jump time.

As we stood in our safety circle to receive our final pre-jump instructions, I glanced around and wondered why all these folks were here. What convinced them to jump out of a perfectly functioning airplane? I knew why I was there. I was tired. Tired of being afraid, tired of allowing other folks' perception of me to dictate my life, tired of letting fear and anxiety block me from taking risks, tired of doubting myself because of where I came from and what I was taught to believe about being Black in America. I was in mid-thought when I realized it was my group's turn to board the plane. To this day, I feel like Inan was the DJ Khaled to my big moment. With his handheld camera (because, yes, I paid the premium to get it all recorded) and *loud* words of affirmation, I felt like I could do anything.

"Let's GOOO!" he yelled as he made his way toward the plane. I quickly followed behind, feeling my adrenaline pumping. Surprisingly, I was more excited than afraid.

I walked past Tomkins, who nervously waved at me and said, "See you when you get back!" With eyes locked, we both said a silent prayer. This was it. My moment.

My group boarded the plane last and made our way to our seats. I counted from the front and realized Inan and I would be the fourth instructor-jumper pair. "Focus on your breath," I whispered to myself as we prepared for takeoff. The engine cranked on, and suddenly there was a choir of instructor-jumper conversations happening all at once. Inan gave me one last DJ Khaled pep talk.

"They didn't want us to jump. They didn't want us to risk it all. God DID!" OK, he didn't really say that, but the spirit of it was very similar.

Within a few minutes, my mind zoned out, and I started to pray. A wave of calmness fell over me as the airplane gained altitude. Instead of nervousness, I felt stillness, and my heartbeat slowed. It's hard to explain how at ease I felt in my heart and spirit. There were no feelings of fear or anxiety. I felt safe. I felt protected.

Suddenly, I was snapped out of my meditative state by a woman in front of me who began to weep hysterically. At that moment, I think she realized she was making a terrible decision. I mean, looking back years later, skydiving is a bit intense, so I can't even blame the lady for freak-ing out. Her instructor tried their best to calm her down because we had finally reached the jump zone and the only way down was by parachute. The door flew open, and everyone started to scoot toward the jumping position. The first tandem pair jumped, then the second, and then it was the weeping lady's turn, who, at this point, was screaming that she had made a mistake. Despite her initial protesting, her instructor managed to get her together just enough and began counting down to their jump: 5, 4, 3, 2, 1.

Then it was my turn. Inan scooted us toward the door. My mind was still fairly calm, but my heart was now beating out of my chest. Inan quickly reminded me of the jump instructions we learned on the ground, then said, "LEAN BACK!" WHOOOOSH! We began to fall, and the sound of the wind rushing past my face was deafening. Finally, after what felt like a lifetime, my parachute opened, and the first words that dropped out of my lips as I caught my breath were "Thank you, Jesus!" followed by the infamous award-winning speech, "Mama, I made it!" For the next five minutes or so, we gracefully floated in the air. I was in awe. The one thought I had over and over again was *Wow, look at what God has done.* All the beauty was overwhelming. Miles and miles of lush greenery and fields. Gazing out into the horizon, for the very first time in my life, I felt clear, I felt open, I felt free. And even though my feet were as high as they'd ever been, I'd never felt more grounded.

We slowly lowered until I felt grass underneath me. I took a deep breath and felt so full of this new energy that I could feel my heart smiling. Goodness gracious! What was this newness that I felt down to

the core of my being? I knew at that moment this newfound awareness would come with a price tag. It needed more space to grow and be cultivated so it could have a permanent home in my life. That jump was just the beginning of what would be years of jumping out of figurative planes and unlocking areas of myself that had been blocked by my chosen narratives, insecurities, and fears.

Speaking of fear, writing this freaking book might be my BIGGEST leap in my life to date. The overwhelm and imposter syndrome I had to overcome while pouring my soul into these pages—sheesh!

Before I even thought of jumping out of planes and getting my mental and emotional life together, I diligently worked as a management consultant. The first fifteen years of my professional consulting career was focused on organizational changes, which really shaped my trajectory as a business transformation consultant. To date, I have helped Fortune 500 companies and federal government agencies alike move through various types of change for their people, processes, technologies, or a combination of the three. My role during these large-scale projects would often focus on helping the people—the actual humans who were in the midst experiencing the organizational shift—navigate change. Starting with building an effective communications plan, I would gently guide them toward acceptance with human-focused training and empower them toward advocacy by creating sustainable systems.

If you've ever run a business or have been in a leadership role, then you know change in any organization is not for the faint of heart. I found myself working more of my coaching muscles as I navigated conversations around fear, job security, and early retirement. Those moments felt like a mental boot camp. I had federal government clients who were used to completing processes a certain way for over twenty years, and I was not only explaining how to operate a new software but also how their job role might change. If you could have only been a fly on those government classroom walls, then you would truly understand that I am a battle-tested coach and facilitator for any work environment.

I'm not going to lie—tapping into my emotional and social intelligence on a regular basis was a challenge, but it was also an energizing

experience. Looking back at those client conversations, I realize that participating in this type of consulting work nurtured my passion for helping humans navigate the one thing that is constant in this life: change. My clients' breakthroughs and aha moments gave me a natural high, and as I progressed in my career, I was inspired to start my own lifestyle coaching business to help even more people. Everything I learned from my early consulting days at IBM, Accenture, and Deloitte, fused with my formal training as an executive coach and positive psychology practitioner, shapes how I help my current clients get results in their personal and professional growth.

In my late twenties and early thirties, I had a few moments where I thought, *What in the hell does any of this work have to do with my life's purpose? How is this work changing the world?* In those moments, I always referred back to my time in the OG Oprah hive, as she is someone who always stayed locked in on spreading the message of living out our life's purpose. As I navigated my early professional days, I heard her voice echo in my head at least once a year, lovingly shading me into being a productive citizen of the world. So, how was this work changing my world or the world of the people who look like me? Well, at the time, the easy answer was "Listen, you're getting a paycheck. Doesn't that count toward generational wealth?" That was valid, but my intuition kept telling me there was something greater.

Today, as a certified executive coach, it's easy for me to see how my work then and my approach to helping clients now are in alignment. Oprah would be so, so proud!

As I continued to grow professionally, I developed a healthy obsession with personal development and found joy in learning new ways to support myself and others through challenges and increase my understanding of how we're wired as humans. This infatuation with human development and growth is what drew me closer to positive psychology.

My introduction to the science of positive psychology came through a coaching program I enrolled in, and I immediately felt connected to its research and interventions. Martin Seligman, sometimes known as the father of positive psychology, describes it as "the scientific study of

strengths that enables individuals and communities to thrive.”¹ I know we just met, so you may not know this, but that definition has Chianti written all over it. Why? Let me put you onto some game. So, boom, traditional psychology (think: talk therapy) is based on a disease model, which focuses on simply remedying ailments. Positive psychology is like the 2.0 version of this, focusing instead on the wellness continuum, which asserts that you can use your strengths to improve your overall well-being. Some folks hear the name and assume it’s all fluff, but positive psychology is not just about positive thinking or ignoring what’s wrong. Instead, it’s about developing a more balanced approach to growth and wholeness so you can live a fulfilled life on your own terms. This perspective is the wave I’m on.

By the end of my coaching certification program, I wanted to take a deeper dive into this new world I was exposed to. My plan was to apply to the University of Pennsylvania’s Positive Psychology Center, where many of the elite positive psychology researchers had gotten their advanced degrees and were teaching. One of my coaching program advisors, and also a graduate of the Penn program, recommended I instead take an applied learning path that would save me both time and money (and your girl loves to save a coin).

Soon, I found myself sitting in my applied positive psychology program, and that’s when I realized there was a personal trend happening at the end of each day. Our professor would lecture, we would pair up with a classmate to practice an intervention or method, and I would often end up in tears, y’all. Like real tears. Happy tears. Healing tears. Reflective tears. I would be damn near dehydrated after a full day of class. At some point, I even stopped wearing mascara to class. I mean, the water works flowed freely. At the end of each session, I couldn’t help but think, *Man, if only I’d learned this as a child*. And sometimes I would turn to the only other woman of color and whisper, “Black and brown people need this,” and she would give me a head tilt with pursed lips that said, “For real, though.”

By the time we reached graduation, a true internal shift had taken place. Curiosity and healing started to replace my fears, doubts, and shame. I now had language and tools to make sense of my own humanity, and my

happiness and well-being felt a bit more sacred. I realized that, for years, I'd been resting in a mindset of lack and relinquishing my power to my past. During my time in that program, I was able to make peace with the dynamic nature of my thoughts and emotions and learn how to acknowledge them without losing my agency. And in understanding more about myself and how I'm wired, I even learned to have a little more empathy and patience with family and friends. When I began to look at the inner child within myself and the people around me, I was able to reevaluate my expectations and biases, creating the space to improve and mend many of my relationships—most importantly, the one I had with myself.

From a personal and professional perspective, I'd found the jackpot of personal growth resources. Regardless of how amazingly helpful I found the information to be, there was still one glaring observation that I couldn't help but notice with every new book, research article, or TED Talk I came across in the positive psychology space: none of the authors, speakers, or researchers looked like me, and I took that personally. To many of us personal development connoisseurs, it might feel like there is limitless access to research-based information on self-improvement, transformation, and positive thinking; however, the fact remains that there is a large segment of people who look like *us* and don't bother to pick up these resources, usually for one of two reasons: one, the message is too jargon-heavy, dry, or boring, so the jewels get lost in translation, or two, they can't connect to the *messenger*. And rightfully so, right? I mean, not too many of us in the "rooting for everybody Black" era are going to take life advice from a seventy-five-year-old white man. Trust issues with white male patriarchy is a real thing. And can you blame us? I know I cannot speak for every Black person's experience because Black people are not a monolith, but I am indeed rooting for peace, growth, and happiness for the entire diaspora, which is why I wrote this book.

I might be jumping the shark here, but I am confident that, while reading this book, you will find at least one powerful nugget that will be a catalyst for change in your life, big or small. And hey, guess what? A win is a win. My hope is that you revisit this book anytime you're in need of a re-up on a little happiness and a lot of healing. Everything

you'll uncover in these pages is inspired by the science of flourishing and well-being, which can best be outlined through the PERMA model. PERMA stands for Positivity, Engagement, Relationships, Meaning, and Achievement, and it's like a cheat code for improving your overall well-being while minimizing factors that might cause you stress. I frequently sprinkle PERMA all up and through my personal coaching, so I've decided to do the same for this book, using its building blocks the same way most Black folks use laundry detergent: like seasoning.

If you've picked up this book, there are few things that might be taking place in your world. Let's start with the fact that you understand there is a divine assignment placed over your life, but you may be overwhelmed and, dare I say, exhausted from all the responsibility that lands on your plate. You have big, audacious dreams that require a version of you that feels out of reach, mainly because limiting beliefs and self-doubt have camped out in your mental space. You desire to break free, but procrastination and people pleasing have you in a chokehold. The growth and progress you desire has not been able to take root because your life is filled with thoughts and behaviors that are serving as barriers to the life you deserve. Or maybe you're just social media coached out. You've watched so many reels and saved so many life advice graphics, but none of it is sticking to your bones. I see you, I feel you, and I understand you. I've been there. I've been in a place where I was on the brink of a shift, but I lacked the direction and support needed to turn that corner. My hope for you is that by the time you reach the end of this book, your load will feel a little lighter. I hope you gain the courage and confidence to unsubscribe from any part of your life that has been holding your greatest self hostage. You will have the boundaries and belief systems required to finally be the version of you who is ready to be set free.

So listen, the Type A side of my personality loves an outline and a plan, so to honor her, let's briefly get into our phased approach as we move forward in this book together.

Phase 1: We're going to **get curious with care**. In order to do this, we'll need to build self-awareness around limiting beliefs, outdated belief systems, and unhealthy habits. Bag lady, get ready to let it go because

we will be doing a *ton* of unpacking. My goal is to help you identify what might not be the most helpful or healthy. I'm not going to lie to you; this might cause a rush of emotions, insecurities, and maybe even a little anxiety. But understand that I got you, and most importantly, *you* got you. Extend yourself some grace and compassion during this phase because, truth be told, up until this point, you've been doing the best you can with what you were given.

Phase 2: You're going to **break up with your blockers**. Once you've become aware of your unhealthy thoughts, habits, and behaviors, it's time to do something about them. Identifying unhealthy mindsets and behaviors is only half the battle. This part of the journey is where I start to introduce tools for self-care, healing, and mass construction so you can build and broaden along the way.

Phase 3: Finally, we're going to **cultivate a community** for your insights and growth. How? With built-in accountability. We will close out this book by making sure you have a built-in support system for the journey ahead. Growth is never a straight line. You'll grow. You'll backpedal. You'll learn, and then you'll grow some more. Think of the resources in this phase as bread crumbs that will help you find your way back on track if you fall off or lose sight of the vision. The secret weapon to your progress in this phase will be surrounding yourself with people and primers (more on this later) that can help you honor the highest version of yourself.

Tall order, right? Perhaps, but you've got this. Together, we will focus on ways to support your growth with grace. Just think of me as the DJ Khaled to your personal evolution. After each breakthrough, we'll tackle *another one* and then *another one!* Now if you're not a DJ Khaled fan, instead think of me as an honest bestie that reminds you of your inner beauty and holds you accountable for protecting it. Use this book to help you unpack what weighs you down, heal the things holding you hostage, and get back to the refreshing and rewarding parts of life. My hope is that this book provides you with a life-altering experience, an experience that is so dope and mind-blowing that you revisit certain chapters once or twice a year just to make sure the growth is secured.

The world is in shambles, and I don't foresee it never not being in shambles. However, I'm on a mission to make sure Black people never give up on creating their own little corners of healing and happiness, as this is a rebellious act against racism and patriarchy. This is what drives my passion for supporting you as you uncover the highest version of yourself. With each level of growth, you will unlock hidden superpowers to inspire yourself and support generations of Black women and children who come after you. As I said earlier, I recognize that Black women and black folks, in general, are not monolithic. Throughout this book, I am speaking from my own unique experience, and my intention is for you walk away from our time together with practical tools and universal truths to design a life that allows YOU to be the most fully expressed version of yourself.

Before you start tiptoeing through these pages, I recommend that you dedicate a journal, tablet, or mobile device to record your thoughts, reactions, annoyances, or insights. I say this with love and a side of accountability: put this book down and go grab something. Please and thank you.

In terms of who all gon' be there? Right now, it's just me, you, an ounce of courage, a drop of openness, and your journal. Are you ready? Let's get started.

SELF-AWARE AF

You Gotta Know the Root to Get to the Fruit

Think warm thoughts, think warm thoughts. Jesus, be a pair of long Johns and a heated blanket, I thought. It was January 21, 2012, as I stood in a sea of faces at the United States Capitol, waiting for our forever First Lady Michelle Obama and her husband President Barack Obama to accept another term in the good ole White House. I promise you it felt like one of the coldest days of my life. I just knew I was going to freeze a few two-strand twists off that day. Despite it being disrespectfully cold, I remember standing there in awe. That was my second time attending an inauguration for President Obama, but I still got a little choked up thinking about the monumental occasion. Our first Black president was getting sworn in for the second time. Man, what a time to be alive, and I was grateful just to be in that number.

I moved to Washington, DC (a.k.a. the DMV), at a pivotal moment in my adult life. I was exploring womanhood outside of my mom and childhood friends, and being out and about in the nation's capital allowed me the privilege to meet many influential people who looked like me, from political figures and civil rights heroes to CEOs, venture capitalists,

spiritual leaders, and even Black Arts Movement icons. The abundance of Black excellence was overwhelming at times, and I was constantly reminded that I was a long way from Greenville, South Carolina. Even going to church was different in the DMV.

I remember getting a phone call from one of my close friends one Easter Sunday, giving me the heads-up that I should come super early to church that day. Even though I always arrive early to get a good parking space and a good seat toward the front of the congregation, this Sunday was different. I walked up to the front of the church and saw huge metal detectors at the entrances with secret service officers lining the perimeter of the building. Guess who'd decided to join us for church service that morning? Auntie Michelle, her husband Barack, and our White House cousins, Sasha and Malia.

If you're from a major city, then you're probably thinking, *So what? I see successful Black people of this caliber all the time.* That is wonderful, and you've had a very blessed life. You hang tight for a second while I talk to my small-town cousins who understand me. Growing up in South Carolina, I didn't see many models of local successful Black folks. For many Black people in my hometown, securing a job at the local factory on the outskirts of the city was considered a high-paying job, and if you were lucky, you might have found your way into education as a teacher. On my side of the tracks, job opportunities for people who looked like me were either in manual labor, education, or the beauty industry. Please don't misunderstand me—those options provide an honest and decent life, but something in me knew there had to be more.

I was raised by a single-parent in a working-class home with my mom and three siblings. We didn't grow up with a lot of material things, but my mother was one of the most resourceful and creative women I've ever known. Although she instilled key values in me, such as independence, resilience, faith, and assertiveness, she couldn't protect me from the harsh realities I would face growing up as a Black girl in the South. Of course, there was no comparison to what our parents and grandparents went through as children, but racism was still there, parading around as redlining, forced busing, and tracking in our school systems.