

# The Power of Bridging

how to build a world  
where we all belong

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with Rachelle Galloway-Popotas

 **sounds true**  
BOULDER, COLORADO

# Contents

Preface . . .	1
Chapter 1 Bridging to the Future . . .	15
Chapter 2 The Problem Is Othering . . .	33
Chapter 3 Is Othering Natural? . . .	47
Chapter 4 Breaking and Othering . . .	61
Chapter 5 Hard and Soft Breaking . . .	81
Chapter 6 On Belonging . . .	97
Chapter 7 Understanding Bridging . . .	117
Chapter 8 Short and Long Bridges . . .	151
Chapter 9 Bridging and Spirituality . . .	173
Conclusion Becoming a Bridger . . .	189

Acknowledgments from john a. powell . . .	197
Acknowledgments from Rachelle Galloway-Popotas . . .	201
Resources . . .	203
Selected Bibliography . . .	211
Index . . .	219
About the Author . . .	223

## Preface

**I**t's impossible for me to talk about bridging without telling you the story of my father and mother.

In many ways, when I tell stories about my mother and father, about my childhood, and about my family, people hear tales of difficulty and struggle. Yet my father and mother had a fairy tale relationship. While struggle and difficulty were part of their lives, it was not their whole story.

Theirs was not a special story for me. It was my life, much of my world, and my foundation. It was only when I moved away and into a different world that I was able to reflect on the world I had come from, much as when we travel and live in different places, it helps bring the world we come from into a different focus.

So let me share with you some aspects of the story of my family as I have come to know it after I became an adult.

My parents, Marshall Powell Jr. and Florcie Mae Rimpson, met when they were just kids. My mother was fourteen, and my dad was sixteen. Of course, for much of Black America in the American South in the 1930s, and certainly for my parents, life had already thrust them into adulthood. They married two years after meeting and went on to have nine children, of which I'm the sixth.

As sharecroppers living in a segregated society, their lives were often challenging. Discrimination was an everyday reality for them, a social norm that was both accepted and disturbing. There was a

degree of normalcy along with a concern for safety. The demands and joys of life would consume much of their available energy.

If I were to go into more detail about their difficulties, you might conclude, “What a hard, tough life. It sounds full of pain and sadness.”

But if I could have you *meet* my parents and get to know them, I think you would experience just the opposite. You might instead say, “Wait, this life of scarcity that you just described, and these beautiful people standing here being graced with more joy than anyone could ask for—those two things don’t quite fit. These people I’m meeting emanate a boundless and radiant love. They appear blessed.”

And you would be right. They were blessed, as am I.

When I think of my parents, they were a beacon of love, with a light that drew people to them. Our house was always busy, not just full with nine kids but always also with other people coming over, just to be around my parents. Love was their language and their practice. People wanted to be in this space of love, and they would often claim our family as their own.

My mother was the matriarch of the family. Behind an easy smile, she had a quiet tenacity that presented a challenge to what was effectively in the larger world a racialized, and in our family a male, caste system. While my dad was the formally named head of the family, we all knew it was my mom who was really in charge. Her sense of justice and kindness was unshakeable. And she did not suffer fools. Well, except for my dad. The public and private face of my family were often quite different.

My father had the stature of a bodybuilder, with a disposition that was vulnerable and sensitive. He was quick to cry at a time when that was certainly not in favor for “real men.” My dad was also, at least to my eyes, more than willing to let someone get the best of him in all manner of things. Even though we didn’t have much money, he would often loan others money, knowing he was not likely to be repaid.

After living in the rural South for years, he had learned to be resourceful in a place with little to no resources. In the family, we

would sometimes refer to him as the mule. He could fix anything, and he would often fix other peoples' cars for free or a promise of future payment, knowing we would not be compensated. It's not that he was unaware of others' intentions, including the intention to take advantage of him, but his approach to life was grounded in love and his faith in God—the God of Christianity. This superseded any other reality.

For years, I was annoyed by this, partially because it pulled me into doing extra work as well. I would often silently side with my mom when she would challenge him for letting people take advantage of him and, by extension, us. I promised myself growing up that I would not be like my father. This is a promise I have broken many times. I now embrace my father's way of living in the world.

I grew up in a full house, full of community and of extended family who opted in because of the love and radiance emanated by my parents. Our story was never one of just struggle—even through the hardest times, there was joy and appreciation.

But my parents and I also had a complicated relationship. I was ruptured from my family for several years as a teenager and young man. And yet I was still loved profoundly. A deep sense of *belonging* was expressed in my family on a daily level. Family is often our early and primary space of belonging. So when that belonging cracked, which would happen when I was eleven, the rupture was painful.

When I say “belonging,” what I mean is being seen, knowing that I matter, knowing that I am with people who care deeply about my well-being. Belonging is being a part of something but with the added elements of dignity and even love.

For me belonging was an expression of being home in the deepest sense. In my family, we were all distinct individuals but irreducibly connected. None of us claimed to be just individuals. The unit of understanding would constantly move between the individual and the family. So much so that when my dad wanted to insult me he would say I was an “extreme individual,” implying I was disconnected and self-centered.

I am telling you this because our family's rupture and repair were deep lessons in all the dynamics I'll discuss in this book. When a break happens at a core level, especially in our early life or with our most intimate community, it can be very difficult to deal with. But as with much suffering, this fracture within my family also helped shape who I am today, including my understanding of and interest in belonging and the power of bridging. The journey of othering and belonging started early in my life with my family.

We lived in Detroit in a Black community, in a neighborhood often referred to as Black Bottom. My parents, like many Black Americans (still called Negroes then), moved to Detroit as part of the Great Migration of Black people leaving the South, attempting to get away from racial oppression and move toward the promise of opportunity. This migration would land tens of thousands in many northern and western cities in the US, changing the future for thousands of families looking for a world where they could be seen as part of the national fabric and be free of racial terror and violence. This was the attempt to escape the long shadow of enslavement and that peculiar institution that unfortunately, despite incredible progress, still haunts our country today.

While no doubt Detroit in many ways was better than rural Mississippi and Missouri, where my parents had come from, it was still far short of a place where opportunities were open to all. When there were belonging spaces, they were full of conditions and contingencies. Black newcomers were pushed into crowded spaces that often lacked basic services. They were not just segregated from the larger society but segregated from opportunity and often from dignity. While this place still managed to feel teeming with possibilities, like other cities across the country, they were possibilities that would have to, in many ways, be deferred.

My life in Detroit in the 1950s was an almost completely Black world. As a child, I very seldom had contact with any people who weren't Black. I imagined that the world must be largely made of Black people. Of course, we would see white people on television, and people of and in authority were likely to be white—most police, store

owners, teachers, and some people who worked at the movie theater, a place I frequented. But most of the people whom I had daily, sustained interaction with were Black.

Yet none of this was particularly salient to my childhood in Detroit. Similar to what writer Zora Neale Hurston noted about not becoming Black, or a colored girl, until she was around white people, for me, growing up in a virtually all-Black working-class community, I was not aware of any other reality. At some level I had no knowledge of Blackness itself. While whiteness was certainly present in knowledge and sometimes physically, being Black as a reference point had not come into clear focus.

This perceptual cocoon I lived in extended across many areas outside of just my family, a reality that would show up later and become influential in who I am. I found very little strange in my first few years of life.

So, for several years, I imagined the world must be largely made of Black people. I was not aware of people from other places, races, or ethnicities. I'd certainly never befriended an immigrant from anywhere. As for Chinese people, whose fate would eventually play a vital role in my path, I'd not only never seen anyone from China, but I was also not aware of any people of any Asian descent. I'm sure there were exceptions, perhaps in restaurants or stores, but these were largely an abstraction.

Despite my physical isolation from other peoples' lives outside of the Black community, I had access to the library and its books, and I had a vivid imagination. From my youngest days I was fiercely curious and was quick to grasp things that I read. I was eager to learn more about the world and its different people, cultures, and places.

All these qualities would set me on an unanticipated course. The new world that opened to me through books would not only change my view of the world, but it would also change my relationship to God, the church, and, most importantly, my family.

The limited geography I traveled, bound as I was in my neighborhood of Black Bottom, was greatly expanded through reading.



When I was eight or nine years old, I picked up a book at the library and started reading about China. Even at that age, it was clear to me that the Chinese people I was reading about were not part of the Christian faith, a fact that would soon collide with my faith and the teachings of the church.

I was raised in the Church of Christ. I didn't join the church; I was born into it. The church to my family was *the* church, not *a* church. It was foundational to our lives. The importance of God and the church to my family's life, and for many years to my life, is hard to overstate.

My father was not just a member of the church—he was a minister in it. When talking to my dad years later about the great love of his life, he without hesitation said the most important love in his life was God. This was followed by my mother and then his children. Knowing the role of faith and of each other in my parents' lives, I did not feel at all slighted by coming in a distant third.

Despite my parents insisting that they loved all nine children the same, we each had our own doubts as to the veracity of this statement. Of course, parents have to say that, but as a child I did not believe it. In my mom's case, each of the nine children privately believed they were the favorite, despite her claims to the contrary. Notwithstanding the story my rational mind tells itself, my heart still feels I am the one most loved by my mother.

So why am I sharing this? Certainly not to make the case that I *was* the most loved. Rather, to share that I held a special place in the family because my own status in the church was of note. While I read a lot in the library, I also read and studied the Bible. I memorized large sections of it. This fact was not missed at church. I was asked to preach sermons by the age of ten, and it was assumed from a very early age that I would grow into a preacher or minister, following in my dad's footsteps. This made the church and my parents extremely proud. This was not just me being good at something; it signaled that I very much believed in our church, the Bible, and the teachings of God. The skills I had were clearly understood to be a gift from God.

It meant that I was destined to carry on God's work. To a deeply religious family, few things could compare.

As I noted, my interest and curiosity were not limited to the Bible. I read about faraway people, places, and even ways of knowing. Reading about China was part of this exploration. What I understood from this reading was not only that most Chinese people were not Christian but that most had probably not heard of Jesus or Christianity.

But what I read about China presented me with a deeply troubling issue. To understand this, you have to know that our church's teaching was that only those baptized in our church denomination, in the name of Jesus, would be saved for eternal life and go to heaven, and all others would be damned for eternity in hell's fire. Belonging, in our church, was extremely conditional. One could be a member only if one accepted the conditions set out by the church. These conditions had come directly from the inspired Bible, so there was no room for compromise or tinkering. These conditions were not negotiable: they were the word of God. This meant that all others who did not adhere to these teachings were going to spend eternity in hell. Only members of the Church of Christ truly belonged. Everyone else was other. This meant that all the Chinese people were going to hell. Even if some Chinese people had heard of Christianity or had become Christians, I did not believe they would likely have heard of the Church of Christ.

For Christians like my family and me, the solution to this was to get the word of the Bible out so that people would hear it and *could* be baptized and saved. While I could rationalize that people, generally speaking, may be afforded some kind of chance to hear the teachings of the Bible to be saved, it seemed clear to me that most Chinese would not have access to these teachings. I developed a deep concern that almost a billion people were going to go to hell simply because they were born on a different part of the earth. I did not understand the thinking that empathy is supposed to be muted by geographical or genetic distance.

This presented a crisis for me that changed my relationship to the church, my family, and myself. I couldn't keep this worry to myself.

One may wonder why an eleven-year-old would be so concerned about these faraway strangers. But at some level I interpreted the teaching of the church to stand for the proposition that *there are no strangers*. We are all the children of God. As an adult, I would still like to believe that.

(To live as if there are no strangers, and indeed to help the stranger, is not just a Christian teaching. At the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, my Muslim neighbors, who knew I lived alone, dropped off a letter on my doorstep. In the letter they asked for my forgiveness. The letter went on to say that the Qur'an calls on Muslims to take care of their neighbors—that there are no strangers. They were concerned and contrite they had not previously lived out this tenet of their beliefs. Their letter was followed by home-cooked meals.)

So in my early concern with the fate of Chinese people, tucked away inside the question “Who are these faraway strangers?” was the question “Who am I?”

I brought the imperative of this inquiry to the church. Every Sunday, following the sermon, the minister at the pulpit would say, “Does anyone have any questions?”

Later I would come to understand that was a rhetorical query. But as an eleven-year-old child, I had an urgent question about these supposed strangers from China, a question that I couldn't find an acceptable answer to on my own. And what does “rhetorical” mean to an eleven-year-old?

One Sunday I raised my hand and stood up when the minister asked his weekly question. As far as I remembered, no one had ever asked a question in my entire childhood in the church. As I stood there, I could feel disapproving gazes and hear an audible collective gasp coming from the congregation.

But Brother Manuel, the minister preaching that day, was kind and inviting. Ignoring the shift and judgment in the congregation, he said, “That's all right, that's all right, Brother Powell, what's your question?” Feeling some relief from his openness, I was eager to hear his wisdom. I asked, “Brother Manuel, what's going to happen to the Chinese people?”

He was clearly taken aback. I elaborated. I referred to the teaching that all non-Christians, or—even more to the point—all who did not accept the particular teachings of the Church of Christ, would be condemned to eternal damnation in hell.

This was not what Brother Manuel nor apparently the rest of the church was expecting. He fumbled around for several minutes, flipping through his Bible to try to find some ideas that would help answer my question and assuage my concern. But all the verses he read as possible answers were vague and only made the situation worse. In the end, it was unfortunate, but it seemed that all the Chinese people, including babies and children, including all the good people (for I reasoned there must be good, even innocent, people in China), would be going to hell. The doctrine in my father's church was not that one goes to heaven just for being good. One must be baptized and have one's sin washed away. Being good without this latter part does not address the problem of all people being born in sin. This was how I understood (and still do) the doctrine of the church I was raised in.

That Sunday in church, a day that changed the trajectory of my life, Brother Manuel, after some frustration, dismissed my worries in the best way he knew how. "Don't worry about it," he said. But I did not take his advice. My question was much more than just a worry.

After that day, I never went back to church.

That was the first of a number of profound breaks in my life, and the dynamics of what I call *othering and belonging* began to play out in a life where I had formerly only known belonging. I would go from being sheltered in a cocoon of belonging to being treated as *other* by the people and community I loved the most.

To understand the depth of this break, it's worth noting that the church was not just core to our lives, but irreducible from our lives. While we probably all know people who talk about religion but don't appear to manifest it in their daily lives, that was not the case with my dad. His Christian faith was truly how he experienced his entire life, and our shared faith was what connected our whole family.

While my leaving the church was a defining rupture for the family, it was my father who felt it the most acutely. My father understood church doctrine as follows: if someone fell away from the church, the churchgoers—in their mind, the true believers—were not supposed to have fellowship with that person until and unless they returned to the church. What this meant is that my father and I stopped talking or doing things together. Only conversations that were necessary and functional were had. With one line of questioning, I had gone from being a future preacher to a sinner. For the next four or five painful years, my father and I did not have fellowship. Even as I write this decades later, I can still feel the loss and pain and even wonder or hope that maybe it did not happen. It did.

There was no talking between me and my father for the next several years except in a limited and functional way—to tell me to do my chores and convey other routine matters. On Sundays, the family would head to church, and I would be given a long list of tasks to ensure I wasn't enjoying myself while they were gone.

My mother was conflicted as to how to respond to each of us; she wanted to tend to the pain of her baby boy while also supporting her beloved husband's beliefs.

From this distance, it seems like a very bad movie. And yet this was happening in a family deeply grounded and embedded in love. Navigating this rupture cut down into the heart of how we saw ourselves and one another.

The cut for me went even deeper. My father was not the only one who was deeply religious; I was as well. This break meant I was not just losing relationships with my father, close friends, and my siblings. I was convinced that, like what I had been taught about Chinese people, I was now also condemned to spend eternity living in hell.

So why was I doing this? I do not think I had a choice. I remember in a conversation with God during those years that I acknowledged I was often a sinner and at times even an insufferable, selfish ass. But in this particular case, the matter was not solely about me. I simply could not figure out how to make peace with the condemnation of