

Breaking Generational Silence

A Guide to Disrupt
Unhealthy Family Patterns
and Heal Inherited Trauma

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Introduction

To accept one's past—one's history—is not the same thing as drowning in it; it is learning how to use it. An invented past can never be used; it cracks and crumbles under the pressures of life like clay in a season of drought.

—James Baldwin

If I could sit across the table and have a conversation with one of my ancestors, I would choose Ms. Geraldine Brandt, the woman who gave birth to my mother. I would set the table with a dish of seasoned white beans and rice and a glass of brandy, her favorite. After telling her how much I missed her radiant smile, I'd enthusiastically share everything she'd missed since her passing. I'd walk her through the many ailments that almost cut my time short and the similarities we shared. I would tell her how her only child, my mother, both struggled and prevailed in her absence, doing the best she could for herself and her children.

Maximizing whatever time I could buy, I would ask my grandmother questions that stem from my own self-doubts, hoping that my openness would inspire her to do the same. I'd seek answers to questions never asked, not by anyone else in my family, and certainly not by me. With her permission, I would ask about the knowledge she gained from enduring

multiple miscarriages and if she'd ever heard of conditions like endometriosis, something I imagine was inherited from her womb to mine.

No longer grandma's baby, I would sit with her, woman to woman, and gather the information I deserve to know, granting me the opportunity to face the inevitable more prepared. I would ask about my complex organs, and if this, too, was something passed down through my DNA. I'd look for guidance on how to comfort myself through my body's unpredictable setbacks, hoping she also required much of the same. I'd want to know if my grandmother also dealt with consistent health scares and mental health issues or if she had the same fears I did about keeping a man when bearing children wasn't easy. And in the gentlest words, I would ask her if she, too, felt like less of a woman due to her challenges with fertility.

Have you ever wondered what consequences have resulted from the stories never shared in our families and communities? Have you wondered what answers to familial questions have evaded us due to a lack of total truth about how we arrived at our current destination? I certainly have, and honestly, I feel more challenged and less equipped to face my future because of this lack of familial understanding. This uncertainty and misdirection are the result of what I call generational silence. In the digital age of short attention spans and constant stimulation, where we're bombarded with never-ending streams of content, the voices of our elders often fade into the background, leaving a void of knowledge in their absence. It's within our family tree and the invaluable stories passed down across generations that we understand the complex makeup of our DNA and feel prepared for what's ahead. This is why it's important that we break generational silence and refuse to perpetuate it in our lives and those of our children or younger generations.

When we break generational silence, we:

- Live in our truths rather than our beliefs or uncertainties
- Recognize that growth is no longer personal and impacts the entire family tree

- Have greater chances to heal and mend fractured relationships
- Gain insights into the rationale behind our parents' and grandparents' decisions
- Strengthen connections and resiliency within the family
- Improve the likelihood that we rest in peace when our time is up on earth
- Become better self-advocates
- Reduce generational trauma

Healing, whether mentally or physically, requires us to learn that we can never truly master self-development or grasp the root of our needs without understanding our genetic makeup. While I can work with what I know of myself, there's still so much more that I carry within me that has been left unseen and unexplored. I've spent the past two years sitting with the revelations of my body, going from surgery to surgery, trying to figure out what's solely mine and what I have inherited from those before me. I've become overwhelmed with my emotions—frustration, sadness, anger, and confusion—which have never guided me toward solutions but have, instead, led me to realize that my request for healing can only be found through an endless string of truths that have lain dormant for too long. I didn't have the privilege of long, deep familial conversations growing up, and the ones I did have were very surface level. They never provided the information I needed to prepare me for the health battles and life circumstances I'd encounter one day.

At thirty-seven, I've learned that my questions won't always yield definitive answers, but greater understanding can bring solace. It wasn't until I started inquiring about my genetic identity that I had the awakening that generations of insecurities were nurtured by fear

and a lack of support. These occurrences eventually led my people to hold their truths as secrets, keeping both moments of pain and revelation to themselves. I see these issues not just in my family but in the many families of the children I work with in disadvantaged and perpetually overlooked communities. But there are relatable secrets within every family, of every class and every race.

To uncover the secrets and get to the other side, I needed to address my healing challenges, all of which are rooted in my family's silence, psychological pathology, and the imprint that slavery left on both sides. This is the journey this book will kick-start for you as well.

Silence Is Too Common

Generational silence is a term widely used in psychology, sociology, and anthropology to describe patterns of communication and avoidance that persist across generations. It is often used when referencing families who have experienced suppressed thoughts or repressed emotions about a common issue for at least two generations. Generational silence resonates across all communities, but its weight is particularly profound within families whose histories are intertwined with trauma, which encompasses not only their physical and mental health but also their struggle for justice and equality. Although the stories of previous generations remain buried in the past, allowing us to avoid the risk of endangering our well-being, the pain they unjustly endured molds the foundations of new generations.

Physically dismantling these patterns of repeated suppression in an attempt to holistically help oneself is no easy feat, and our efforts can manifest themselves in many ways, including demanding respect and fair compensation, equitable employment opportunities, preventative health screenings, and the resources required to discover our ancestral truths. This work also often involves taking complex steps like openly sharing the intricacies around the sorrows that built emotional walls between us and the pains that keep our soul ties at a distance.

I believe that every individual's commitment to healing positively impacts the world. It's the type of healing that shakes the fruit off a tree

and feeds communities and families. And so the thought that we're here to just fulfill a purpose, a singular task, pales in comparison to the greater task of challenging the silence that plagued those who brought us here, helping us live beyond limited understanding and form new realities for ourselves. When we become complacent among the silenced, we end up living a life directed by a misguided self-perception and lessen our ability to meet our greatest potential. Finding a solution to personal problems, making informed decisions, or realizing our full potential depends on our capacity to grasp as much available information as possible from both our ancestral and personal pasts. It requires us to collect family data and learn as much as we possibly can about where we come from. These genetic ties hold the key to our deepest beliefs, perceptions, and fears, and taking the time to understand these hidden aspects of ourselves can open the door to a higher level of self-awareness and personal accountability.

How many of us really know and understand the contents of our DNA and the trauma we carry from experiences that are not our own? Have you ever had the privilege of talking to your mother about the daily stressors she faced while carrying you in her womb or the intrusive thoughts she carried postpartum? It's also important to note that ancestral memory extends beyond the confines of our familial narratives. It proposes that memories, experiences, and traits from our ancestors influence their descendants' behavior, perceptions, and physical characteristics across generations. Though not scientifically proven, some researchers suggest that epigenetic mechanisms—epigenetics is the study of heritable and stable changes in gene expression that occur through cultural transmission—may contribute to this phenomenon, implying that aspects of our ancestors' lives and experiences persist within us, shaping our identities and impacting how we engage with the world.

Through my nonprofit organization Precious Dreams Foundation, I work with children in the foster care system and those who are unhoused. Since our inception, we've created local chapters across the states and served over 25,000 youth. In NYC, we are part of the first responding teams that welcome youth into care and help them navigate

the transition from these systems, offering them support and necessary tools through our first-of-its-kind, brick-and-mortar Comfort Shop, self-soothing workshops, and mental health programs. About 94 percent of the youth we serve are children of color who often ask me questions like “Why did my parents give up on me?” “Was I not good enough?” or “Why me?” I know the answers they so desperately seek will never be received unless their families are healed enough to give honest responses.

Even the most present parents will tell you they did the best they could with what they were given. But I believe it’s only the most healed parents, the ones who are brave enough to face unfavorable judgment, who will admit to their shortcomings and understand how their own upbringing and life circumstances influenced their decisions or mistakes and, by extension, their parenting. By facing their truths, these parents have the power to profoundly impact and potentially save their children from unnecessary years of confusion and pain.

For youth seeking to understand their place in the world, this loss of familial connectedness can result in feeling a lack of belonging altogether. This thought alone often leads me to think about the many migrant youth in the US who were sent away from their home countries to hopefully find safety and opportunity in a new land. Psychologists Marshall Duke and Robyn Fivush conducted a study at Emory University that suggested that having an “intergenerational self” or family narrative boosted children’s self-esteem. Asking children a simple series of questions like “Do you know where your mom and dad went to school?” “Do you know an illness or something really terrible that happened in your family?” and “Do you know the story of your birth?” helped inform the psychologists’ conclusion that the more children knew about their family histories, the more control they felt over their lives and the more they believed their families functioned successfully. Understanding that children with a stronger sense of family narrative typically have feelings of control over their lives and higher levels of emotional well-being, it’s easier for me to understand why the kids at Precious Dreams Foundation have a harder time perceiving their

ability to overcome challenges. Despite their immense capabilities, they are held back, in part, by the undisclosed circumstances and secrets that they were born into.

Creating this book has become a journey of healing for everyone involved—the children I work with, my family, friends, agent, book coach, therapist, and editor. As I continue to nurture these relationships, both new and old, I've learned that generational silence is a shared experience among us all. During one of my 6:00 am writing sessions, I received an email from my literary agent that said, “The day after my dad was diagnosed with cancer, I found out my biopsy came back positive for melanoma. That, plus a family history of cancer (my mom and her mom both had cancer in their forties), has inspired me to see a cancer genetics counselor, especially as I look to start a family of my own. I've thought of your project the entire way through this journey and have encouraged my siblings to explore the same testing. There hasn't been much I can control, but I can control this, and it's given me a pathway toward healing in its own way.”

Once complete strangers, I found myself sharing things with my writing team that I've never shared with my therapist, and vice versa. The weight of responsibility I felt from those keeping me accountable made it even harder to write and, at times, inspired insecurities that led to self-defeating thoughts. Nevertheless, penning this book was a mission I felt compelled to fulfill. I had the revelation to write this book in 2022 while taking my first solo shower after a string of surgeries that left me with nerve damage on the entire right side of my upper body and, thus, partly immobilized. I knew that writing, as it had done countless times before, could save my life as I continued to search for answers. I needed to document the process of mentally and physically healing while learning my new body and find a way to keep my discoveries in a place that could be found one day to hopefully help someone else.

My heritage as a descendant of the Russell and Medina family tree is a mix of Black, Latin, and European descent. Growing up on Long Island, I used to explain that in full to people whenever they asked

about my race. Naïve, I felt it benefited me to explain to others that I was like them in some way, overexplaining for acceptance. Now as an adult, I simply identify as Black because, at the end of the day, that is how I'm seen by the world, regardless of my genetic makeup.

My father's lineage traces back to a small town named Estill in South Carolina, where today's population consists of just under 2,000 people. Like most Black families, our history is intertwined with the complexity of the United States's deep-rooted racial issues. On one hand, my family grew up on the "Russell Plantation," and on the other, I was recently able to trace my maternal grandparents' whereabouts back to New York City, but that's as far as I've been able to go. There's so much history lost, similar to many others. Being of Puerto Rican, Black, and Mexican descent, my mother takes great pride in her heritage, though she never had the chance to learn about her culture or history firsthand, never visiting her ancestral homeland or learning the language.

The interconnected stories of my ancestors remained unexplored until I began writing this book. Learning so much each day through conversation and online research, I started to discover just how many missing pieces existed in my puzzle. Why didn't my parents ask their parents personal questions? Were they told not to? Why didn't they choose to share their childhood challenges or the traumatic experiences that shaped them into the people I now call Mom and Dad? And now that I was beginning to initiate these conversations, how could I expect my parents to understand the power of their voice, especially if no one had shown them the importance of it? After all, they're Black Americans. And for Black people in the United States, recognizing and utilizing one's voice for progress is still strangely celebrated as a unique occurrence rather than a standard practice. In many ways, writing this book feels like an act of resistance as I intentionally turn the lights on in a metaphorically dark and dusty room and go against the behavioral strategies that were passed down within my family. My research thus far has revealed another example of how the oppressor has yet to be held accountable for the immeasurable impact of systemic inequities that have kept my family quiet for decades, if not centuries.

As I came to understand where this silence stems from, I had to ask myself an important question: If my parents barely speak to me about the past, how can I convince them to allow me to share their past with the world through my work? In setting myself up for this challenging journey, I'm bound to ruffle some feathers and make others uneasy, but that's not my intention; I simply seek truth, which is the one thing that has the power to set us all free. I had to lean on faith that my family would understand that.

I often think about how many Black people carry so much pride in their culture and family traditions despite the harsh realities and adversities we face. To do this, all while living in a society that hasn't shown any interest in our familial security, feels like pure bravery. In the modern day, family separation—particularly within the foster care system—disproportionately affects Black and Brown families. In fact, African American families are overrepresented in reports of suspected maltreatment and are subjected to child protective services (CPS) investigations at higher rates than other families.¹ This historical trend of family separation and the disinterest in keeping Black families together can be traced back to the forced sale of men, women, and children during slavery.

In her book *Help Me to Find My People*, Heather Andrea Williams uses personal narratives of enslaved people, historical documents, and public records to explain the heartbreak caused by forced family separation. Desperate for reunification, mothers would walk from plantation to plantation in search of their children, and families would take out “Information Wanted” ads in hopes of finding their kin. She explains, “Sources offer clear evidence of deep pain on the part of those who lost family members and they also suggest that the expression of this pain in the presence of whites was sometimes muted, silenced, or buried, because whites would not tolerate it and perhaps also because blacks thought that expressing their grief openly would avail them of nothing.”² Heather shines a light on the undying hope and unwavering determination of Black Americans to survive and thrive in their pursuit of family and connection, despite the gaps our history has left along the way.

Piecing my family's story together took great effort and mental stamina. Reflecting on their silence forced me to think about my ancestors' sacrifices, their limited beliefs, and the ways in which they were forced to conform in order to be accepted by the outer world. I've thought about them being forced to adhere to the oppressive realities of the time, stripped of the ability to enact any form of lasting change. This led me to dive deeper into their stories, exploring the many ways conformity came at the cost of their overall health—mental, physical, and spiritual.

My paternal great-grandmother was raised on a plantation that once housed slaves. She, by all accounts, was a white-presenting woman who disapproved of her rebellious children, who all married brown-skinned people and had melanated grandchildren. If your skin was dark enough that someone could tell you were “colored,” you were unwelcome in her home, regardless of your relation to her. The trauma she must have experienced to adopt this thought process and reject her family, the harm she internalized and later passed down, and the ideas of unworthiness she must have felt rattle my spirit even in mere contemplation. It leaves me frustrated, knowing that it wasn't just a choice but a sacrifice that my pale-skinned grandfather made in marrying a dark-skinned Black woman. In choosing to move North, he sacrificed everything so he could provide a better life for his children and their future children, including me.

No matter where or who you come from, there are secrets in your family, and those secrets hold the key to unlocking generational patterns of both thought and action. Even if you are estranged from your family, adopted, or completely detached from your biological lineage, you carry DNA that you can learn about through conversations with those who may have known your loved ones, online research, and/or public files. Don't question whether it's worth knowing the truth. After processing the emotions that come with the truth, you'll find that truth is the reality that propels your spirit into a place of healing, not only for yourself but others. In each part of this book, you'll be met with questions that can help you spark these conversations,