#WOMEN HEALING WOMEN



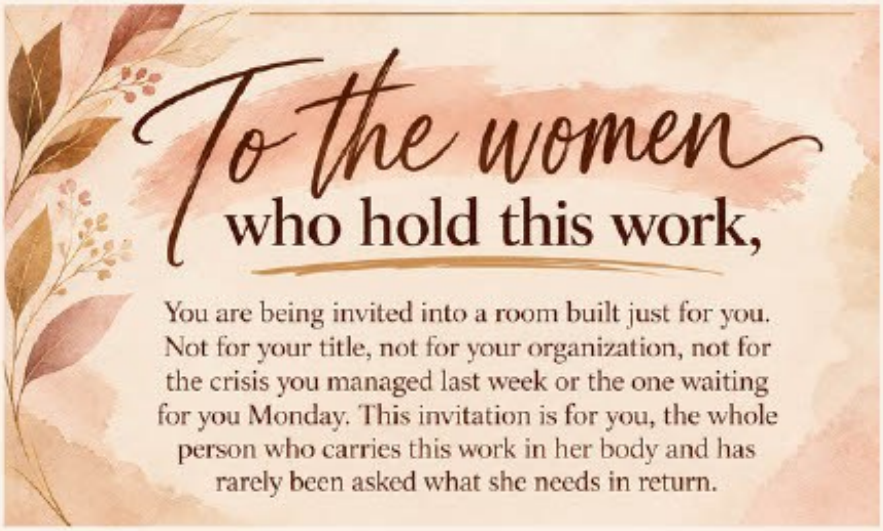
Healing the Healers

NORTHWEST VICTIM SERVICES

Rooted Narratives & STORYTELLING

NEWSLETTER DESIGNED & CREATED BY TOBI DOWNING

WELCOME AND *Our Invitation*



Healing the Healers is a movement for women who lead, organize, counsel, advocate, and show up for people surviving gun violence, domestic violence, sexual violence, homicide, and suicide loss. It is for the women who answer calls at 2 a.m., who sit across from families on the worst day of their lives, who carry institutional memory that no training manual could replace, and who so rarely get asked how they are doing.

We are building a movement that is, more than anything, a celebration. An honoring. An acknowledgment of the labor you have given and the fruit that labor has produced, even when no one thanked you for planting the seed.

Come as you are. Come tired. Come joyful. Come guarded, if that is where you are, and let this circle meet you there too. There is nothing to perform here. We are only asking you to bring your full self and let us hold what you bring.

This is an invitation to join a community of women who understand this work from the inside, to learn alongside one another, and to be cared for as well as to care. We hope you find your people.

What This Movement HOLDS

Healing the Healers is built with joy at the center, and it is built to last. Joining this movement means regular outreach and support from women who understand this work, tools to sustain us, and a circle that shows up between gatherings as well as at them. It means laughter, music, movement, and play, alongside care mapping exercises, resources for how we receive and pour into each other, and a mutual care agreement we make together. As the circle grows, it also means room for honest conversation and trusted strategizing about our work, because women who carry this much weight all year deserve a community that asks nothing of them except to show up as they are.

To keep us connected, we are building [Mutual Care Network], a living directory of the women who join. It holds your name and email, and, when you choose, your care map and the ways you can give and receive support, so the circle can reach you, you can reach each other, and we can show up when one of us needs it. It is held with care and shared only with your permission.

THE WOMEN HOLDING THIS CIRCLE

When we gather, Rysheda Elliott guides us as our Mutual Care Guide. Rysheda has spent years walking beside women moving from incarceration into leadership, and she carries a rare understanding of how differently each of us arrives at this work, even as we share the same intersecting need for care and agency underneath it. She has shared her own journey with a generosity that reads less like instruction and more like testimony, proof that a woman can stand fully in her own greatness while still holding the light steady for everyone walking beside her. We are honored to have her set the tone for our time together.

Creating this movement alongside her are its co-creators, Melany P. Nelson and Tobi White-Downing. Melany has spent years in service to survivors, building programs and cultures that treat support and dignity as never negotiable, and while her work has earned recognition and awards, none of it has ever dimmed her commitment to the people in front of her. Tobi has moved through many roles across victim and survivor advocacy and public safety policy, shaped by generations of women who poured into her, and she is weaving those roles into a world where we get to name what we need and build it, anyway.

The three of them sit in many of the roles blooming across the **Flower Mama** on this program's cover: Mother, Advocate, Caregiver, Storyteller, Griot, Keeper of Memory, and the many more that bloom there. They understand, in their bones, what it means to need a circle, and they wanted nothing more than to build one of our own.

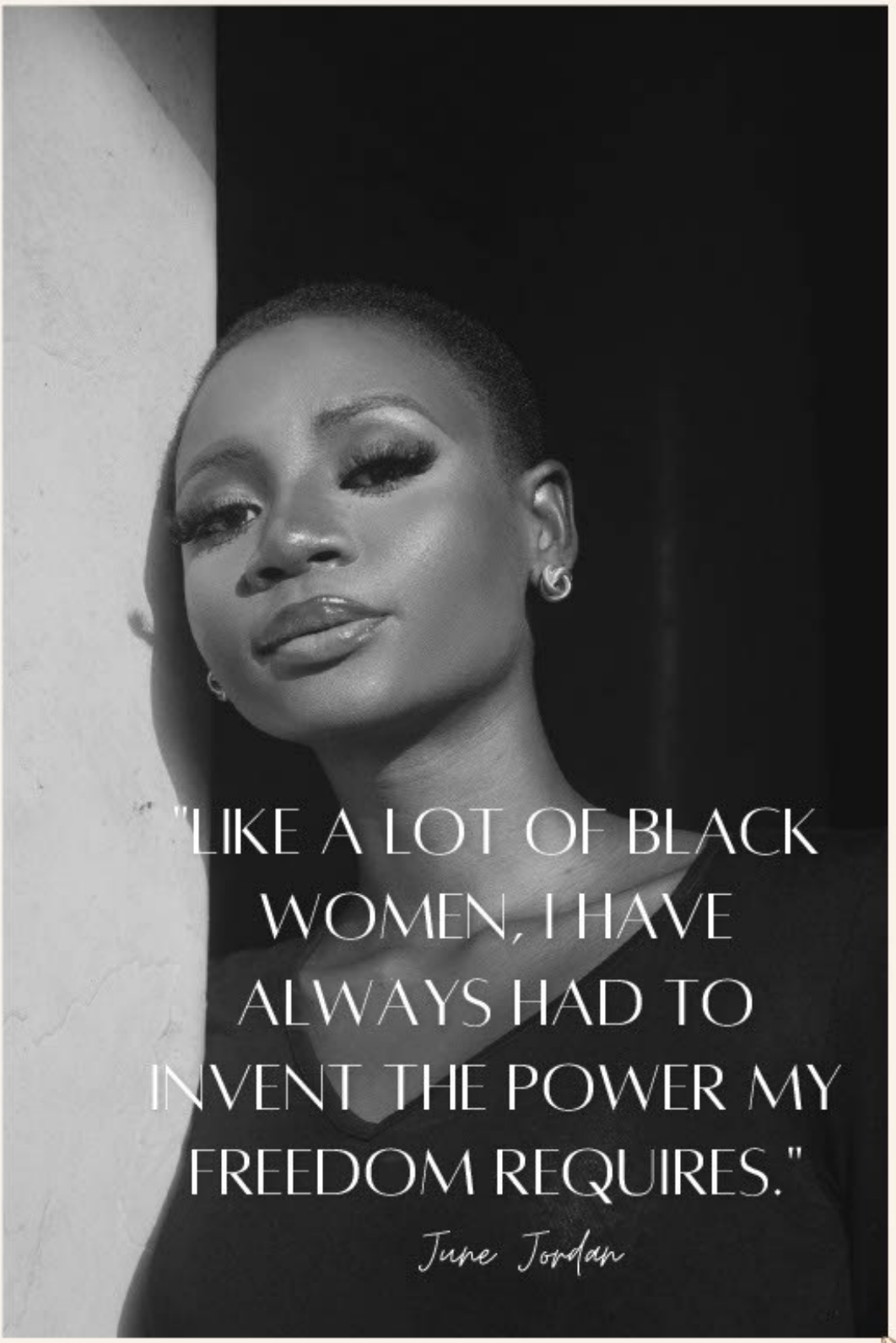
A Mutual Care AGREEMENT

This agreement is between us, the women around the world, not between our organizations. It asks nothing of your title and everything of your presence. It is not a contract. It is a promise we are making to each other, one we can revisit and reshape as this circle grows.

As part of this collective, we agree to the following, for ourselves and for one another.

- We will treat this circle as a place where the truth can be spoken, and we will protect that trust by holding what is shared here in confidence.
- We will check in on each other beyond the walls of this gathering, not only when there is a crisis, but as a regular practice of care.
- We will be a resource for one another when one of us is struggling, burned out, grieving, or simply needs to be heard by someone who understands this work from the inside.
- We will celebrate each other's wins as fully as we show up for each other's hard days.
- We will come to this circle as ourselves, not as our organizations, and we will let each other set the pace for how much we share.
- We will hold no judgment for the woman who needs to step back, and no judgment for the woman who needs to lean in.
- We will return to this agreement together and change it as we grow, because a living agreement should be allowed to change.

This is an invitation, not an obligation. You are free to take from this circle what serves you and to shape your own place within it.


"LIKE A LOT OF BLACK WOMEN, I HAVE ALWAYS HAD TO INVENT THE POWER MY FREEDOM REQUIRES."
June Jordan

Unpacking CARE

Before we build this community, we want to name what care costs, because our job descriptions never do.

THE EXPECTATION OF CARE

Women who do this work are expected to care endlessly. It is written into the role even when it is never written into the job posting. Direct service workers, victim advocates, outreach workers, and community-based leaders are expected to absorb trauma, hold grief, de-escalate crisis, and offer comfort, often while receiving very little of that same care in return. Care becomes the unspoken job requirement and the unpaid overtime.

THE DEVALUATION OF CARE

At the same time this work is expected of us, it is consistently undervalued by the systems that depend on it. Care work is treated as something women naturally have to give rather than a skill that was built through years of practice, study, and lived experience. When care is treated as instinct alone, rather than labor, it becomes easy to underpay, easy to overlook for advancement, and easy to burn out without consequence to the institution.

A LEGACY WE ARE STILL PAYING FOR

This devaluation did not begin with any of our organizations. It is rooted in a much older story about whose labor gets counted and whose gets assumed. Tipped wage structures in this country trace directly back to the years following slavery, when formerly enslaved workers were pushed into service roles and paid a fraction of a wage under the assumption that they should be grateful for whatever a customer chose to give them on top of it. That assumption, that Black labor could be paid in gratitude rather than in full, did not stay in restaurants and hotels. It traveled into every field where care and service intersect with race and gender, including ours.

We see it in how passion is used as currency. Community workers are told the work is meaningful, that it is a calling, that the impact speaks for itself (which it does), and somewhere in that language the conversation about fair pay quietly disappears. Passion becomes the wage. Purpose becomes the benefit package.

We see it in our own organizational policies and practices. Direct service workers, the people closest to survivors, the people who hold the most trust and the deepest community knowledge, are consistently the lowest-paid people in our organizational structures. Meanwhile, roles requiring formal credentials but less proximity to the community are compensated at a higher rate, regardless of who actually holds the relationships that make the work possible.

Unpacking CARE

ON PEER-TO-PEER WORK

Peer specialists, credible messengers, and community-rooted advocates carry knowledge that cannot be taught in a classroom. That knowledge deserves to be named as expertise, not treated as a lesser or informal version of it. As more organizations build peer-to-peer models, we have to be vigilant about how we compensate the people doing that work. It is not enough to celebrate lived experience in a mission statement while paying peer specialists far less than we would pay a credentialed clinical role doing comparable relational labor.

This is not an argument against formal education or clinical training. Both matter and both deserve fair pay. This is an argument for expanding what we recognize as expertise, so that a peer specialist's years of survival, trust-building, and community knowledge are valued with the same seriousness as a degree on a wall.

We name all of this not to dwell in grievance, but because healing has to include honesty. We cannot fully rest in a room that pretends these dynamics do not shape our daily lives. Naming them is part of what makes this day, and the circle beyond it, a safe one.

CARE IS NOT (ONLY) INSTINCT. IT IS SKILLED LABOR, BUILT OVER YEARS, AND IT HAS A FAIR PRICE.



CARE MAPPING

Who Is Expected to Care, and Who Pays for It

Tracing the expectation and the devaluation of care, from its roots to our own offices

1 THE EXPECTATION OF CARE

Care gets assumed of us before we ever apply

Roles handed to women, and especially Black women, with the care already written in and the pay left out.

Mothers · Daughters · Wives · Sisters · Friends · Caregivers · Teachers · Social Workers · Domestic Workers · Advocates · Community Advocates · Direct Service Workers · Peer Specialists · Community Holders

The darker roles mark the community and advocacy work many of us hold, often on top of the roles at home.

WHERE IT WAS BUILT

2 THE HISTORICAL ROOTS

The expectation has a history

Care was assigned first, then priced at gratitude.

SLAVERY

Forced births, borrowed care

Enslaved Black women were forced to bear children and made to nurse and raise other families' children while their own were sold away or left uncared for.

AFTER EMANCIPATION

The tipped wage

Formerly enslaved service workers were paid in customers' gratitude in place of a full wage, a structure that still shapes who gets paid fairly for service.

THE NEW DEAL

Left outside protection

Domestic and agricultural workers, many of them Black, were excluded from labor protections, so care work stayed cheap and unguarded.

WHERE IT LIVES NOW

3 THE DEVALUATION OF CARE

The same logic lives in our work

Extraction can look like commitment from the inside, because so many of us choose this work out of closeness and a cultural grounding in collective care.

Paid in purpose
Passion and calling stand in for a living wage. Meaning becomes the benefit package.

Proximity becomes the contract
We stay because these are our people. The structure counts on that and prices it at nothing.

Trust without pay
Direct service workers hold the most community trust and knowledge, yet are often paid the least and seen as the least skilled.

Lived experience drawn on, rarely paid
Relationships, stories, and expertise are taken freely and seldom credited, compensated, or protected.

Peer roles paid below their worth
Peer specialists carry ways of knowing no classroom teaches, and are sometimes paid far less than clinical roles doing comparable relational work.

Budgets fund programs, not people
Funders and policies cover the work while leaving out staff wellness, rest, and fair pay.

WHAT WE DO ABOUT IT

THE TURN

Care is skilled labor, built over years, and it has a fair price.

Name the pattern
Say out loud who gives care and what it costs them.

Refuse it where we can
Stop treating passion as a substitute for pay.

Lift other ways of knowing
Value lived expertise alongside formal education.

Build alternatives
Design pay, policy, and culture that honor the labor.

Care Mapping framework by Tobi White-Downing · Drawing on We Build Anyway · Healing the Healers

Ways We Care

FOR OURSELVES AND EACH OTHER

Secondary Trauma:
Naming What You're Carrying

If you work in violence prevention, victim services, community organizing, or any field adjacent to trauma, you're likely experiencing secondary trauma, also called vicarious trauma or compassion fatigue.

What It Is

The emotional and psychological impact of being repeatedly exposed to others' trauma. You don't have to experience violence directly. Hearing about it, witnessing the aftermath, supporting survivors, this creates its own wounds.

Signs You Might Be Experiencing It

- Emotional exhaustion and numbness
- Intrusive thoughts about the violence you've witnessed or heard about
- Hypervigilance (always on edge, scanning for danger)
- Cynicism and loss of hope ("nothing ever changes")
- Physical symptoms: insomnia, headaches, digestive issues, chronic pain
- Difficulty maintaining boundaries (you can't stop thinking about work)
- Irritability with people you love
- Substance use as a coping mechanism
- Feeling like you're failing no matter how much you do

If you're nodding along to more than a few of these, you're not weak. You're human. And you need support.

Practices of Self-Preservation as Political Strategy

Audre Lorde wrote: "Caring for myself is not self-indulgence, it is self-preservation, and that is an act of political warfare."

She wasn't being dramatic. She was naming a truth in a system that profits from your depletion, rest is resistance.

What Self-Preservation Looks Like
(Beyond the Clichés)

1 Physical
- Sleep (actual, regular, sufficient sleep, not "I'll catch up this weekend")
- Nutrition (food that nourishes, not just whatever's fast)
- Movement (whatever feels good to your body, not punishment)
- Medical care (preventive, not just emergencies)

2 Emotional
- Therapy or counseling (with someone who understands this work)
- Peer support (people who get it without you having to explain)
- Boundaries (saying no, even when it's hard)
- Grief rituals (space to acknowledge loss, not just push through)

3 Spiritual
(However You Define It)
- Whatever feeds your soul (nature, faith, art, music, silence)
- Connection to something larger than yourself
- Practices that remind you why you do this work
- Joy, pleasure, beauty, not as reward but as necessity

4 Community
- Who holds you? Who do you hold?
- Are you allowing yourself to be cared for, or only giving care?
- Do you have people who check on you, not just ask for things?

5 Creative
- Play, art, music, writing, movement
- Things you do for no reason except they make you feel alive
- Permission to be "unproductive."

6 Political
- What gives you hope?
- What sustains your belief that change is possible?
- How do you stay connected to vision, not just crisis response?

Building Peer Support Networks

One of the most powerful things you can do is find your **people**. Not just colleagues, but comrades, people doing similar work who understand the toll it takes.

What Peer Support Looks Like
- Regular check-ins (not just when you're in crisis)
- Shared processing of difficult cases or situations
- Collective problem-solving
- Celebrating wins together
- Holding each other accountable to boundaries
- Rotating who's "on call" so no one person is always available

How to Build It
- Start small (2-3 people you trust)
- Set a regular time (monthly coffee, weekly call)
- Create guidelines (confidentiality, no fixing, just listening)
- Make it reciprocal (everyone gets space to share)

Example: In Philadelphia, some victim advocates meet monthly for what they call "Sacred Space," two hours where phones are off, no one talks about logistics, and everyone gets to be human. They share what's hard, what's working, what they need. No one leaves without being seen.

This isn't extra. It's essential infrastructure.

When to Step Back, When to Lean In

There's no formula for this. But here are some guidelines:

Step Back When:
- You're so depleted you're doing harm (snapping at people, making careless mistakes, feeling resentful)
- Your presence is more about your need to feel useful than what's actually helpful
- You've lost perspective (everything feels urgent, nothing feels manageable)
- Your physical or mental health is deteriorating

Lean In When:
- You have capacity, and the work aligns with your skills
- Community is asking for your support (not you deciding they need you)
- You can contribute without depleting yourself
- The work energizes you, even when it's hard

Ask for Help When:
- You're struggling (not when you're drowning)
- You need skills or resources you don't have
- The work is too big for one person
- You're isolated and need a connection

The Key: Sustainability isn't about working less. It's about working differently in ways that allow you to keep going without destroying yourself in the process.

Source: *We Build Anyway*, T. White-Downing

A Care Mapping Activity for the Day

This activity builds on Care Mapping, a practice at the center of *We Build Anyway*. The original practice asks organizations to map who gives care, who receives it, and what breaks along the way. Today, that same lens turns inward, and you are invited to map your own care story.

Opening with The Color Purple

We begin with short scenes from The Color Purple, a story about Black women who carry one another through hardship, often with very little carrying them. As you watch, notice who is giving care, what it asks of her, and what it gives back.

Celie and Nettie

Sisters whose bond is held across distance, separation, and long silence. Notice what care looks like when two people cannot be in the same place, and what each sister does to stay connected to the other.

Consider: How does each sister show care? What does it ask of her? What keeps the bond alive when so much around it works to break it?

Celie and Shug

A relationship that begins in tension and grows into tenderness, with care that reaches Celie's sense of herself. Notice who is giving care, how it is given, and what changes as it is received.

Consider: What does Shug offer Celie? What shifts in Celie as she receives it? What does Shug receive in return?

Celie and Sofia

Two women who meet each other's strength in different ways, and a bond tested when Sofia feels betrayed and confronts Celie. Notice how each woman carries hurt, how it gets spoken, and what repair asks of both of them.

Consider: What was each woman protecting in that moment? What does it take to confront someone you trust, and to hear it? What does care look like after a break in trust?

Care Mapping Through Story

Bring one object, image, song, or short memory that represents a moment someone cared for you, or a time you felt cared for, inside or outside of this work. In small circles of four or five, you will take turns sharing that story for a few minutes each.

After each story, your circle answers three questions out loud together, as reflection and never as critique.

1. Who gave care in this story?
2. What did it cost that person to give it?
3. What would it look like for this room to offer that same kind of care to the woman who just shared?

Your Card

To close, each woman writes one thing on a card that she is willing to receive from this circle going forward. The cards are gathered, shuffled, and read aloud without names. Hearing our needs spoken back often shows how alike they are, across very different roles and organizations.

What You Carry Out the Door

Care Mapping traces where care flows and where it runs dry. Today it makes your own life the map, and it sends you home with a circle that has heard what you need.

Stay Tuned...

This circle will keep growing, and there is more on the way. Rooted Narratives and Storytelling is the part of our circle that shares resources, support, and opportunities to gather, so the care we practice together has somewhere to land beyond any single day.

The Digital Resource Café

Visit www.rootednarrativesandstorytelling.com to find the Digital Resource Café, where downloadable resources and presentations are shared to support the people doing this work. Check back for upcoming events, new resources, and chances to gather with us.

The Books

Limited, one per person. We have a limited number of free copies to share, one set per person (*We Build Anyway* and *Finding Your Story*), on a first-come, first-served basis. To request yours, reach out to hello@rootednarrativesandstorytelling.com.

Source

The frameworks, language, and ideas shared in this program, including the Care Mapping practice, come from Tobi White-Downing, author of *We Build Anyway* and founder of Rooted Narratives and Storytelling LLC.



We hold each
OTHER



FIRST GROUP OF BLOOMING FLOWERS

Thank you

This invitation is not the whole of what we are building. It is the doorway. What matters most is what happens when Monday comes, the phone rings, and the inbox fills, and a woman doing this work remembers she is not carrying this work alone anymore.

We are honored to build this with you.

NORTHWEST VICTIM SERVICES

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