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On Parenting • Perspective

My daughter reminded me that black joy is a form of resistance



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By Tracey Michael Lewis-Giggetts

June 19, 2020 at 6:00 a.m. PDT

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The laughter that poured out of us that day was sudden and staccato, much like the torrential storm that threatened to pummel my plants if we didn't close the entry to the plastic greenhouse that already sat precariously in our small backyard.

"Look at me, Mommy!" my daughter said, the Afro-puff on top of her head swelling in the winds. Her wide-mouth grin was like a checkerboard with her two missing "Dracula" teeth.

We finally got the closure zipped when, in true 8-year-old goofball fashion, she started dancing. Her arms flailed as she did something that could only be described as a cross between the "Milly Rock" and the "Renegade." Ordinarily my reaction would have been to say, "Girl, get your tail in this house and get those soaked clothes off!" But something shifted in me. I matched her Gen Z shenanigans with a little Gen X, old-school righteousness and hit her with a "Cabbage Patch" and "Hammer dance" combo. Then we both did something we hadn't done in a long time.

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We laughed uncontrollably.

Not a few chuckles like when we see a funny meme on the Internet. Not even the giggles that come when Duck mistakes some random stuffing for Bunny in Toy Story 4. This was a guffaw. A scream-laugh. An unearthing of all the things, known and unknown, that ailed us.

When we got back into the house, I cried. Mostly because I'd been vacillating between sorrow and rage the whole week prior, and I understood what that singular moment really meant. In my mind, we were two black girls in a backyard turning the world and white perceptions upside down with our joy.

I suppose, on the surface, we both may have just needed the release. My daughter has not seen her friends or had a play date since March. I have been wrestling with all the things [most quarantined, working moms have to manage](#). But there was so much more behind my deluge of tears. I knew what our joy represented. It was its own kind of resistance. Our joy was an affront to our Trump-supporting neighbor down the street. It was an affirmation for the black mom who lives across the street with her daughters. It was a cleansing experience for us and, in many ways, it was a demonstration of what Zora Neale Hurston once said: "Sometimes, I feel discriminated against, but it does not make me angry. It merely astonishes me. How can any deny themselves the pleasure of my company? It's beyond me."

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Our dancing in the rain wasn't a denial of all the storms that had moved in on black people that week. It was a dare. An indignant stance of confidence in the midst of this malignant monsoon called systemic racism. Our laughter was a way to say "you can't steal our joy" to anyone who'd dare deny our humanity. Author and scholar Imani Perry, [in a recent article for the Atlantic](#), captured this feeling well: "Joy is not found in the absence of pain and suffering. It exists through it. ... Blackness is an immense and defiant joy."

Joy as resistance isn't as much of a stretch as some might think. We constantly hear about the alleged rioting and looting happening during recent protests and uprisings around the country. What we don't hear too much about is the spontaneous breaks in protests when dancers and singers and artists take over where the chants and confrontations left off. The way the crowds stomp an insistent rhythm into the pavement feels like a Diasporic clarion call. The engagements [and weddings](#) that have happened in the middle of marches are too often considered anecdotal for some but are actually intentional acts of defiance. [Why else would a woman dressed in ivory satin stand with her partner](#), eyes wide and full with liquid love, kissing fervently to the sounds of protesters' cheers?

Choosing to express our joy loudly and without reservation is directly connected to bringing our *Imago Dei* (made in the image of God) humanity front and center in the movement.

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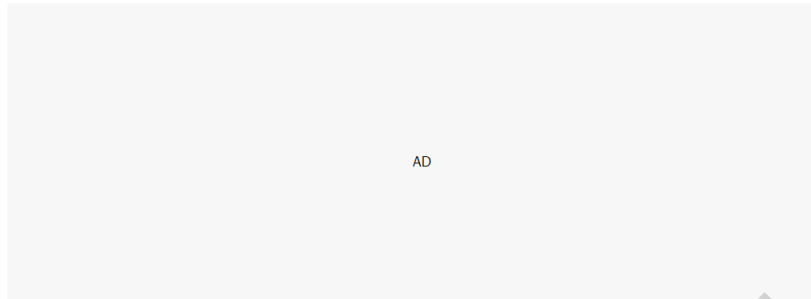
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That's a necessary form of resistance because it clearly punches the lights out of the pervasive dehumanization we encounter every day.

More than even resistance, though, dancing in the rain with my sweet girl illuminated just how powerful and healing black joy can be for black people. That night, my baby girl slept more soundly than she had in months. I was able to quiet the panic that fills my chest when, long after the little one's bedtime, I sit at my computer and prepare to write another essay about another hashtagged brother or sister.

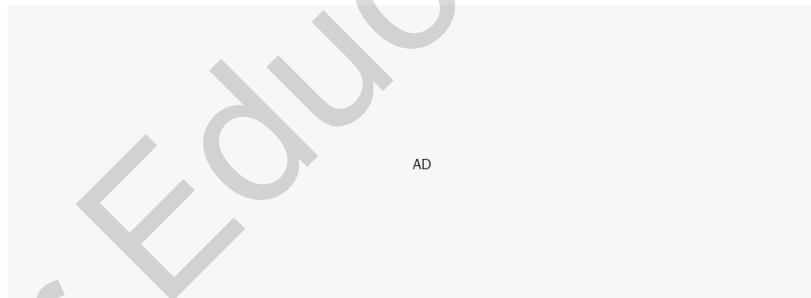
In the wake of George Floyd calling out for his long-passed mother as his neck was being crushed by a police officer and what I imagine was Breonna Taylor's last dream before she was shot while trying to sleep in her bed, it's hard not to believe that the only real and lasting weapon I have as a black mother is to circumvent these generations-long traumas with generational joy.



My daughter will laugh and cry and dance as much as she likes with as much freedom as I can afford her. She will know that she can laugh and cry and dance in the sun *and* the rain.

And sure, I'm a mother. So after the laughter was over and both our hair and our hearts were drenched, I might have still said, "Girl, get your tail in this house and get those soaked clothes off!" But this time, my words were laced with some newly recovered ammunition: joy.

Tracey M. Lewis-Giggetts is a writer and educator whose work explores the intersection of culture (race, class, identity) with faith/spirituality. The author of 13 books, she is the host of the podcast [HeARTtalk with Tracey Michael](#) and is the chief creative officer at [NewSeason Books and Media](#), an independent publishing and content creation company. She can be found online at www.traceymlewis.com.



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