

Reflections on Tending to the Wounded Body

John Rich

When young Black men are shot, they don't always die. Television news might make you think otherwise, though. The news gives only passing reference to nonfatal shootings, especially when they involve a lone victim. Those young survivors are mostly ignored and left to suffer alone. When young Black men are brutalized by the police, they are not always shot. Sometimes the wounds are inflicted through inhuman indifference. Kari was one of these wounded survivors.

When I met Kari, a 20-year-old shooting victim, he was lying in a bed on the surgical ward at Boston Medical Center (BMC). When Kari explained to me what it was like to be shot, he focused first on the young man in a hoodie who rode up to him on a bike. The young man eyed the gold chain that Kari wore around his neck and said "Run that!" meaning "Give me your chain." Kari resisted by pushing him over and running but the assailant fired several rounds from a handgun, striking Kari in his back and legs. He then walked over to Kari and gently removed the chain from his neck. He patted down Kari's pockets looking for cash and then said "I should kill you," before riding off.

The chaotic moments that followed were the most uncertain. As the crowd gathered, before the police arrived, Kari lay on the ground wondering if he would live, but was increasingly convinced that he would die. Kari told me that as he lay bleeding, with his body pressed hard against the asphalt, his friend inexplicably poured a can of soda on his back. "Why?" I asked.

"I don't know! He was panicking though. I didn't feel it anyway," Kari replied, an ominous sign of the seriousness of his injury.

Kari also told me about the police. After the incident with his friend and the soda, the police moved everyone away from him as they waited for the ambulance to arrive. A police officer assigned to guard him from any more bystander assistance stood over him.

“Cause, the cop wasn’t even doin’ me no favor, no help or nothin.’ He wouldn’t let my man touch me, nothin.’. They was like, ‘Leave him alone. Don’t touch him.””

Looking down at Kari, the cop berated him sarcastically. “Then he kept sayin,’ ‘Don’t do nothin’ stupid like die.’ And I’m lookin’ at this cop, like, ‘What?’ He’s like, ‘Don’t do nothin’ stupid like die.’ I’m like, ‘Shut up! I’m just layin’ in dirt all over my face. I really thought I was going to die. I really did.”

Fortunately, Kari did not die. The ambulance transported him to BMC where the emergency team rushed him to the operating room. In order to save him, the surgeons had to open a large incision extending from just below his breastbone, down and around his navel, and then continuing almost to his groin. “I don’t know why the doctors cut me up like this, man. I got shot in the back. They cut me in my stomach, I don’t understand why they cut me in my stomach. I got shot in the back. Then they cut me from here, all the way up to like right here.”

The incision was left partially open to allow any infection to drain. Each day the heaped-up wound had to be cleaned in an excruciating ritual where the infected tissue was removed. Once the margins of tissue were exposed, the healthy edges were gathered together with a corset-like device. Each day I saw him, Kari would tell me “Getting shot didn’t really hurt. But it was all of the tubes and the smells and the pain from the surgery. I never want to go back to the hospital.”

As a Black doctor, I know that Kari’s poignant story is not unique. The physical effects of the bullets only constituted a fraction of the pain he was left with. For Kari, the pain was not isolated to his body, and it was not limited to the pain inflicted on him by bullets. His emotional wounds tracked back to those moments when he lay in the road contemplating and fearing his own death. That pain was enveloped and amplified by dehumanizing treatment at the hands of the police officer who chided him. The surgical disfigurement of his body, in the name of saving his life, also remained with him as a continual reminder of his trauma, not as a badge of honor as some have assumed. Tending to his body

now meant engaging with his disrupted abdominal wall. It meant having clinicians touch his body in ways that made him feel weak and sick and subjugated.

And the oppressive memories triggered by unavoidable ordinary acts like walking down the street to his home took much longer to heal than the wounds to his body, if they had the chance to heal at all. Bessel Van der Kolk's aptly titled book *The Body Keeps the Score* points out the ways that even those traumas which are lost to conscious memory often inhabit our bodies. It is likely that this trauma will inhabit Kari's mind and body for decades and perhaps generations.

But healing is possible for young Black survivors. And healing rather than just recovery is what Kari required to reintegrate his whole self. Medical healers lean so heavily on healing the body that we fail to acknowledge this mind-body wholeness that young men like Kari are so desperate to reclaim. My emergency medicine partner prefers the term convalescence to recovery, because it underscores healing as a process of regaining health and strength over a period of time, without assigning stigma.

The connection between the mind and body and the meaning of injury is vital because it determines how quickly the mind and body can heal when the wounds are so deep. Despite the randomness of the assault, Kari searched for meaning. He believed that God was trying to send him a message. "I think it was a wakeup call for me. He knows I gotta get my life together. Like I gotta do somethin' different. Personally, that's what I think. I got a son, and I wasn't spendin' like time with my son, even though he's only three months old. I did what I had to do, made sure he had everything, but I really never spent time with him and stuff. And I see that's what I missed."

Bessel van der Kolk is right when he says that the body remembers what the mind has long forgotten. The process of tending to the body acknowledges the imposing scars that survivors carry, and that speak to their humanity, vulnerability, and desperate desire to heal from their racial trauma. This

racial trauma encompasses not just the physical and emotional, but the accumulated and internalized oppression imposed by society for being Black.

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So now the verdict is in. I can breathe. But now I feel a muted, exhausted relief, and I find it hard to know how to feel. The police force in Brooklyn Center, Minnesota, remains armed to the teeth despite the conviction of the police officer whose knee destroyed a Black life and opened a hidden wound in the chest of every Black man and woman. The “inadvertent,” “accidental”, “Holy shit, I just shot him” death of Daunte Wright and the intentional, diabolical, and calculated execution of George Floyd frame a year of fear, terror, and isolation. In Black communities across the country, ravaged by COVID-19, there has been little room for the healing funeral rituals called “home-goings,” which depend so heavily on closeness and touch. These losses are compounded by the explosion of violence in poor Black communities across the country, especially in large cities where some families have lost multiple children to the trauma and violence. This violence speaks of the deep despair brought on by so much death, loss, and fear.