

EXCERPT

UNLEASHING OUR
POWER FOR REVOLUTION
AND REBIRTH

Becoming Heroines

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INTRODUCTION

Into the Valley of the Shadow of Death

Megan died on a Thursday night in May, two months and two days after my kids and I went into lockdown for COVID. For more than four years, she had been my right-hand person, the head of community and social media at my company, and a dear friend. Her death came suddenly—in January, she was diagnosed with cancer, and on May 14, 2020, she was gone.

Early May was a blur of percipient grief. I learned Megan was terminal in a text message from her, which revealed that after four rounds of chemo, her cancer had resurged and there were no more options. It was a matter of days until she was no longer conscious. Calls went out to all the women in our community who knew and loved her. We spent those twelve days in communication with her family in Colorado, and with one another over daily texts, phone calls, bizarrely comforting Zoom meetings, waiting for news, knowing the end was near.

In addition to being a teacher, a guide, and a brilliant strategist, Megan was also a shaman. She spent three years in her early fifties in shamanic study with a Native American teacher, and I had the benefit of witnessing Megan's talents in this regard firsthand. It was no surprise, then, when strange, out-of-this-world things began to happen as the veil between life and death opened up for Megan.

Our collective of women holding watch began to report that Megan was showing up in dreams with messages for each of us and for each other. I had an incredibly detailed dream of a visitation from her, where she described what she was setting up for me as she hovered in liminal space, that ended with the repeated message "the debt is paid." In another, she arrived to literally help me forge through a stream of rapids to get to the other side of trauma. Others in our group received messages from her about children or lovers or purpose. As we circled around one another, listening to her as she walked between worlds, these messages got stronger and stronger.

All of 2020 was strange, but this window of twelve days in May waiting for the arrival of death will long feel to me personally like the strangest. Every day at around 4 p.m., I would sit on my back porch here in Southern California, and begin texting Megan's sister for updates, and then move on to texting with our circle of women holding watch. I would pay attention to the earth, to the birds that appeared overhead, to the movement of the breeze and to the weather. Every day, it was like stepping through a portal into a space between here and there, with her, with all of us. She was on a bridge between worlds, and we began to walk it with her.

The day before she passed, I was sitting outside when a strong

breeze came through and all of a sudden, I felt her presence. There was a whisper in my ear, and I felt her standing beside me. There's no way to describe what happened next without sounding a little in-between-worlds, but just go with me: I heard her voice.

"Bring the rain," she said. "Tell them all to do it. Show me you can do it, show me you know how. Show me you know what you need to know."

It was the oddest request. I had no idea what it would entail, but I knew what it was: it was a demand to *prove* to her that we knew what we, this circle of women, were capable of changing, that we understood our power, and that it was OK for her to go.

I put out the call to our circle. "Bring the rain," I said, and no one responded like they thought I was nuts. I waited for an impulse for what to do next.

Never one for grand gestures like controlling the weather, I walked outside onto that porch with my kids. I looked at the sky, and I said to them, "we're going to bring the rain." It was a sunny day. Neither of the kids looked at me like I was crazy. My daughter stood there with me, totally believing that we could do this, and we swept our arms to the sky, looked to the clouds in the west, toward the Pacific Ocean that was there but that we could not see, and we gestured to pull those clouds to us, right over our house, by force of will and by force of belief that we could.

Coincidence or not, something shifted. The wind began to kick up. Something moved in the air and all of a sudden the dust on the patio was swirling and the temperature dropped. Lo and behold, the clouds began to move, and things began to get, well, weird. I watched that bank of clouds move over my house. I stood there, breathing it in. I left the presence of now and

realized I was well within the space of what could not be explained by rational thought. Curiously, I've never felt so simultaneously powerful and grounded, while also out of my own body, in my entire life. It was as though I had stepped into ritual and space, something ancient and modern at the same time, and found skills that were buried in my DNA that I never knew I had—skills that were needed here and now as they were needed thousands of years before, and that would serve me and the collective moving forward.

As the clouds rolled in, I put on the music that we were playing to Megan all around the world, and that her sister was playing for her at night. The song, by Sara Bareilles, is called “Saint Honesty,” and the word that runs through every chorus? *Rain*. I paused. I listened. I breathed. I closed my eyes.

And a few minutes later, my daughter ran inside the house to where I stood. “Mommy!” she said. “We did it! We made it rain!” And sure enough, there on the back patio was a splattering of raindrops, just begun. We had done it, out of nothing. On a sunny day, out of nowhere, we had brought the rain.

And then, in an instant, my phone began to blow up with messages from our circle of women. Rain in Boston. Rain in New York City. Rain in Hawaii. Rain in the Midwest. Rain *everywhere*, not predicted, out of blue skies. Rain. Rain. Rain.

It was a breathtaking moment of collective action that shook the foundations of the possible in a moment of dire grief. We witnessed it. We saw it. It was real.

The following night, I woke up to thunderstorms. Again, the messages came in from all over the country—rolling thunderstorms everywhere, right around 10 p.m. Colorado time, where

Megan lay dying. We learned the next morning that at 10:05 p.m., she'd left us.

The rain and the thunder were there to welcome her home. We got to witness her magic and her power as she departed, and it was spectacular.

I look back on that moment with a deep inner knowing of what Megan wanted. She wanted the circle of women in which she traveled so intimately to know that we were ready for what was to come—that we were ready for battle, for change, with an inherent understanding of the power we already had and the power we could create. She wanted us to know that all it takes to activate it is the belief that we have it in us. She wanted us to know that we were heroines, and that we were walking with heroines, and that we were made of magic.

She wanted these things with good reason.

By the night of Megan's death, 85,581 people had died of COVID in the United States. George Floyd had only eleven days left to live. Ruth Bader Ginsburg would be gone in four months and four days.

Megan knew what it meant to be walking in the valley of the shadow of death, and she knew that we were all walking it right there with her.



Death has a way of ripping the veil off of everything, from the most personal to the most public. COVID, of course, tore it all wide open. There is no aspect of our culture and society that survives unchanged. From work to health care to education to child care to climate change to criminal justice to systemic racism to

politics, everything was set on fire. We can see, finally, in the clear light of day, all the genocidal, racist cracks at the foundation of our nation that have always been there, waiting to pull the entire structure down.

So much of what we thought we could count on as Americans is now revealed to be a part of a great lie. The reliability of our institutions, the myth of American exceptionalism, the idea that we had moved beyond the crimes at the root of us (without ever truly addressing them), have rightly been revealed in all their weakness and falsity. Everywhere, finally, we see the truth, the *injustice*, of what America has always been, and it feels as though everything is on fire.

The thing about this moment that has set American mythology alight and reduced it all to ashes, however, is that ashes make for fertile ground. While we grieve what we lost or what truths we thought we knew that have turned out to be lies, we are simultaneously laying the groundwork for what could, if we claim our power, come next. Indeed, our collective mythologies of heroines reflect this—from the Phoenix rising from the ashes, to the Hindu myth of Kali, the goddess of destruction, smeared in ash and covered in blood, dancing—*dancing*—in the cremation ground.

Why, folks often ask, would she dance when she is surrounded by such misery and death? Why dance when everything is lost, burned, gone? Why smear oneself in the remains of what we thought we knew and those we loved?

We dance in grief to celebrate that we are still alive.

We put our feet on the earth, covered in ash as war paint of what we lost, because the story isn't over, because ashes transmute into the seeds of our future.

We dance because the remains of what has burned become the place from which we are reborn.



Over the months since Megan's death, one myth of heroines has danced around me nonstop. It is the little-known story of the Daughters of Danaus, also called the Danaids. Permit me, if you will, a brief retelling. It goes like this.

Danaus was the son of a king, and had fifty daughters. His twin brother, Aegyptus, was the King of Arabia, and had fifty sons. Aegyptus commanded Danaus that his daughters must marry Aegyptus's sons. Danaus, unhappy with this order, fled with his daughters, and Aegyptus followed, threatening war if Danaus didn't hand over his daughters for their nonconsensual marriage.

To avoid bloodshed, Danaus relented. But all was not as it seemed.

All fifty of Danaus's daughters were sacrificed to this battle among brothers. On their wedding night, all but one of them was raped by her new bridegroom. On instruction from their father, however, who was determined to not capitulate to his brother, those forty-nine brides murdered their rapist husbands as they slept. Danaus had his revenge.

One of the daughters did things differently, however. Hypermestra refused to follow out her father's orders to murder her husband because her husband refused to rape her on their wedding night. Danaus was livid, and brought his daughter before the courts for refusing to carry out his murderous order. The goddess Aphrodite intervened, however, and saved Hypermestra and her husband. The couple then founded a dynasty, known

as the Danaid Dynasty. She got to rule, in equity, with the husband who had refused to violate her, and who she in turn had refused to murder under order from her patriarch.

But what of the other forty-nine daughters? In most retellings, the daughters were condemned to carry water in leaking vessels to a bath designed to “wash away the sins” of murdering their husbands after rape engineered at the hands of their father and uncle in a petty dispute. The vessels never filled though, nor the bath—the water always seeping out, for all eternity. In most versions of the story, the daughters were left with this Sisyphean effort to cleanse themselves of the stain of following the orders of patriarchy, with no redress and no end, forever.

I’ll ask you to hold space right now, though, for a different interpretation: what if we might imagine the Daughters of Danaus to be heroines in this tale? What would that look like? Pause on that for a moment.

For the valley of the shadow of death has one more tale to tell.



Eight scant days before the 2020 election, a fire broke out in Silverado Canyon before dawn. Thanks to the historically unprecedented speed of the Santa Ana winds combined with the absence of rain for the previous nine months, what came to be known as the Silverado fire tore through seventy-two hundred acres in Southern California in the next eight hours, destroying everything in its path.

And as it ripped down the hillside of the canyon in the direction of the Pacific Ocean, directly in between the two stood a neighborhood: mine.

Silverado Canyon has a long and storied history of mining and ruin, starting in the mid-1800s when prospectors showed up and “laid claims” to the land that the Tongva people had lived upon for centuries. Those prospector colonizers tore holes in the canyon’s earth and in her mountains, plowing into the hills looking for silver and leaving perilous conditions in their wake.

While the canyon is now largely abandoned, Silverado has not forgotten the actions taken against her by men who, for more than one hundred years, sought to plunder her most valuable resources without permission and stole the land of the indigenous people who cared for her. She still lives in the trauma and the vengeance of it. Tunnels left from her violent excavation are still so full of water and methane gas that as recently as 2002, two men who tried to swim them suffocated to death on the noxious air.

And now, in late 2020, Silverado Canyon was aflame.

I drove out of my town with less than a half hour’s notice when the evacuation order came down, with just my kids and dogs and barely more than the clothes on our backs. We left so quickly I forgot our passports. As we turned the corner off our street to leave, the air was thick and orange and I could see smoke plumes across the main boulevard three blocks from our home.

For the next two days, holed up at a friend’s house in the Inland Empire of California, I considered, not abstractly, what it would mean to lose everything. In the middle of the night, unable to sleep and curled up on a queen-sized foldout couch, I stared at my phone, scrolling for news, as the kids slept on either side of me. The fire was within a half mile of my home, jumping streets I drove on a daily basis, as firefighters tried and failed to contain her. Why we were living through this, six months into a pandemic, surrounded

by so much death and loss, on the brink of an election that was certain to determine whether American democracy would die or live to fight another day? Why here, and why now? I obsessed over the existential and practical questions, looking for answers in the blue light of my phone in the dark.

It was at that moment that I came across an update on the location of the fire. Homes in my town were burning at the corner of two prophetically named streets: Ritual and Ceremony.

The fire was burning at the intersection of Ritual and Ceremony. And suddenly I inhaled.

This fire was not a purge, I realized—devastating to those in its wake, to be sure, but manifesting as a reclamation. The canyon was taking back what had been stolen from her, revising the land, burning off what was no longer needed along the way. She was burning it all, as fast as she could, to make way for new growth. A ritual by fire, a ceremony for her rebirth—and maybe, just maybe, for ours.

I turned it over and over in my head, no longer worried about stuff, journals, photo albums, material things that we left behind. I returned to the *why*, the witnessing, and what it means to start over from nothing, what it would require of me and my children and our community, but also for our nation at a moment when we were days from destruction or a chance at rebirth.

I listened to my children breathe next to me in the dark.

I listened to the silence.

And then came the thought.

We were meant to be here to watch it all go up in smoke, to watch the end of what we thought we knew and what we thought we had, to bear witness to the end of what we thought was permanent and

untouchable. We are here to bear witness, and to process and transmute the grief.

The birds began to sound the sunrise outside the room in which we lay.

And if that's true, continued the thought, then we are meant to be here now as well for something bigger. We are meant to be here to birth whatever comes next.

And with that, I fell asleep.

Two days later, my house was still standing, as were all the other houses in my neighborhood—a few damaged but still there, a scant two thousand feet from the nearest fire damage. The fire scar is still visible from the window of the room where I sit writing this, but so is the new green growth within it.

What in the end stopped the Silverado fire was air tankers, full of water, dumped from the sky by hundreds of firefighters from all over the region working together, in a relentless procession that went on for days.

What began to heal Silverado, and saved my home in the process, was a collective of human beings who came together to pour down on her exactly what she needed to create the conditions of her rebirth.



Here's the thing about the Daughters of Danaus: they bring the rain.

They are the filters through which every ounce of life-giving water flows to hit the earth.

Rather than a hell of purgatory of never being forgiven through the lens of patriarchy's sins, they are heroines who revolted

against forced marriage and rape, against the sins of the father-brothers who engineered a system by which they were bartered as property.

And when the revolution against all those who sought to ruin, destroy, oppress them was over? The Daughters of Danaus, now known as the Danaids, became the water bearers, the sieves for that which is life-giving, the source of a different way of being, in collective, that fertilized the seeds that lay buried deep in the earth. They became the bearers of the means for rebirth.

For if, as heroines, we were meant to be here as everything we thought we knew was set on fire, when all that we knew or believed or hoped for was lost, and where death has been omnipresent—if we were meant to be here to bear witness and to be agents of change—then we are also meant to be here to bring the water, to bring the rain, to create and engineer the rebirth of nations and the rebirth of hope, to be the heroines in our own stories and the heroines of water, fire, earth, and air for this time and beyond, through a profound inner knowing that *this* is why we are here.

We are heroines already. We just don't know it yet.

We were meant to be here when it all went up in flames.

And we are meant to be here to birth what's coming
next.

We are walking the cycle of the heroine's journey right now.

And it's time to bring the rain.

THE HEROINE'S JOURNEY AND THE HEROINE WITHIN

Anyone who's ever been exposed to Greek mythology is aware of the hero's journey. In brief, a man sets off on a quest, usually due to war or a woman (we're always to blame), and along the way is confronted with demons, lessons, temptations, and battles within himself and with others. Eventually, he returns home the victor, to share the spoils of war with his fellow men, of which women's bodies and service are usually a part, to live happily ever after.

Our story, the story of the heroine, is different. Why? Well, in addition to the fact that our quest is usually to benefit the collective and not just ourselves, our learning is cyclical. Over and over again, we return to the same lessons, experiences, even similar personalities in relationships, each time peeling away the layers of awareness. One routine example of this is the way in which we encounter, for instance, a similar boss in one job after another, a similar personality type in the partners we choose, or a similar experience at work or in life that calls us to learn and grow. While this may sound like a broad overgeneralization, there is not a single woman I've worked with in the past decade who hasn't had the experience of similar challenges, relationships, and archetypes coming up in her story over and over again, until the lessons that she is meant to learn and the gifts she is meant to take from each person, archetype, or process is complete.

Along the way and in each passing cycle, moreover, the heroine shares her stories with her circle of friends and allies, as others do with her. These are the true gifts we bring back through each

cycle of the journey. Our stories of overcoming personal, professional, and societal challenges inform our paths as individuals and in collective, and we cycle through each phase again and again to ever greater learning and knowledge.

In contrast to the hero's journey, the heroine's journey carries both good and bad news in its cyclical nature. In short, once the heroine is called to her journey, it never ends. This is the moment when I am here to welcome you to yours, because as a reader of this book, you have just stepped onto the path—perhaps for the first time, perhaps again.

Critically, what the cycle of the heroine's journey creates in each of us is *endurance*. And endurance is what we need on a path that demands that we combat the oppressive structures that keep us “in our place,” deny our achievement and refuse us access to power.

In our current era, patriarchal and racist structures of oppression are having a profound and public field day. Our personal and professional lives are inexorably impacted by the daily struggle to survive and thrive in the face of that, even if—and perhaps especially if—we choose to try to ignore them.

What we need to succeed as heroines—indeed, what we have always needed—are profound and powerful tools to fight back against structures of oppression every day, in every way, for as long as it takes.

HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

The aim of this book is to lead each reader through the four stages of transformation on the heroine's journey, a path traced by legend and myth, carved by feminist thinkers like Clarissa Pinkola

Estés and bell hooks, pioneered by generations before us that broke with establishments, power structures, and institutions that did not truly serve them, and distilled through the prism of our lives. I've filtered them through the sieve of my own experiences and those of hundreds of fellow travelers along this path.

While the cycle of the heroine's journey is without question a progressive one, you should feel free to drop in on the stage that calls to you the most. Because the heroine's journey is one that continues in an infinite spiral, you'll eventually want to cycle through each part of this book as it informs each stage of your personal quest.

And if at some point you find yourself wondering if you've failed along the way, or come to an impasse or a dead end, I'd encourage you to use that as a catalyst for introspection. All of us falter. Inevitably, we all meet profound challenges, including our own internal demons and blind spots.

Those challenges point to the work we have not yet completed. And a reminder: as I say quite a bit, perfectionism is a tool of oppression, including when it is directed inward. Be kind to yourself. There is no true failure on the path toward your own leadership save to quit the journey, to quit learning, to quit striving to live into the purpose and mission for which you came to be here, and for the betterment of all. Trust that you'll be given opportunities for more learning, for reconciliation, for excavation, and for growth, in every arena where there is still work to be done. Enjoy those possibilities, even when they're uncomfortable, and keep going.

Throughout this process, my greatest hope is that every one of you will claim your rightful role in the world as the heroine of your own journey, as a force for good, as a woman and in

collective, and most importantly in furtherance of justice and freedom for all.

Together, we can heal ourselves and one another; repair the wounds of history; reconcile our roles in collective damage; and move forward to change our institutions, our governments and our workplaces, to create freedom and equity for all.

I believe within my bones that this is why we are all here, at this moment in history, heeding this collective cry for change.

I believe that you're a part of that, or you would not be here reading this book.

So, welcome to your journey.

Here's to Becoming Heroines.

A WORD ON THE LENS OF THIS BOOK

This book is a book about the excavation and embodiment of the heroic feminine energy that lives within all of us. While specifically directed at cis and trans women and non-binary folx, this book includes lessons for the heroine that lives within each of us, and its tools concern the means by which the heroine has been buried by white supremacist patriarchy, and thereby impacts all of us, regardless of gender identity.

Throughout the book, I specifically address women (cis and trans) and non-binary folx in the context of my work at the Gaia Project for Women's Leadership. However, it is my hope that this work resonates with and benefits all gender identities, and encompasses a telling of the path of the heroine that meets each reader where the heroine resides within her, him, or them.

The use of the terms “woman” or “women” is intended herein to include all those who resonate with femme energy, regardless

of gender identity, and to be inclusive to the greatest degree possible. While our language is inherently coded by the structures this book seeks to undermine and revolve, my aim has been to have intent and impact merge throughout for the inclusion and benefit of all.

As well, I write this book as a white cisgender able-bodied woman, bending in the direction of bisexuality on the spectrum of sexual orientation, raised in a class trajectory that went from working to middle to upper-middle class over the course of my upbringing, highly educated, and bearing other significant stamps of privilege. I cannot claim to speak for those outside my realm of experience, but I do share within the book the stories and experiences of my clients across the spectrums of diversities that they represent.

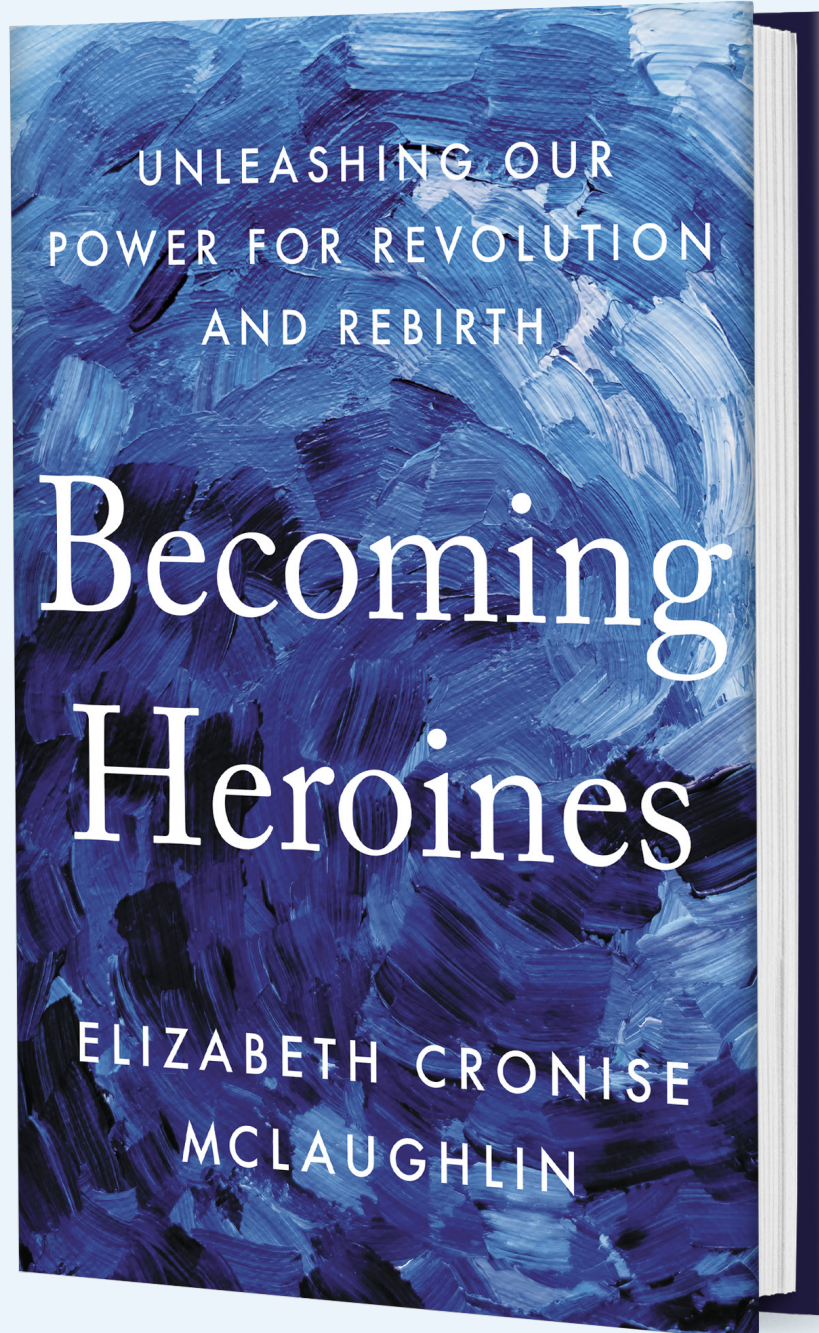
At this moment in our collective history, this book seeks to confront in part the fact that white women urgently need to reconcile with our internalized racism and sexism, and our complicity in systems that perpetrate hate. I am relentless in my demand for that work and accountability. We are *too late* in confronting our complicity, and we are *too often* part of the problem rather than the solution. As a result, there are parts of this book that speak particularly to white women in stark terms on the work left to be done. I do not, in these portions of the book and in speaking explicitly to the ways in which white women need to confront our complicity with systems of oppression, mean to negate in any way whatsoever the incredible work of BIPOC heroines on the path—past, present, and future—nor their lived experiences and critical role as heroines in all the revolutionary work currently under way. It is my hope that I have adequately conveyed my belief that

we must all walk arm in arm, while following the lead of Black and brown and indigenous women if we are to achieve real change and real redress for historic harm, and as we work to build a better world for all. Where the teachings of specific BIPOC women, men, and non-binary folx have impacted my work, I have done my best to name them and to give all credit where it is (long over)due.

Lastly, there are doubtless places in this book at which, through the lens of history, my words will appear outdated and wrong, where I will have to be accountable once again for blind spots in my own thinking, and for which I will owe amends and apologies. We are living right now in a portal of transformation that is so rapid that this book has already had many lives and many incarnations and at each stage has been revised over and over to become more inclusive and, I hope, reflective of my ever-growing awareness of the work ahead. I have done my best throughout this book to write from an anti-racist and anti-bias lens, from the moral and ethical principles by which I live my own life, and to all those across every spectrum of diversity with whom I walk on this beautiful and difficult path toward creating freedom and justice, and with love, for all.

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