

UNTIL WE RECKON

VIOLENCE, MASS INCARCERATION,
AND A ROAD TO REPAIR

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Our Reckoning

So what do we do with what we have done?

The scale of harm—both individual and structural—that we as a nation have committed is immense. Knowingly and unknowingly, honestly and dishonestly, we have crafted a story about violence and brought that story brutally to life in a new form. In incarceration, we have protected and exacerbated the core dimensions of slavery, woven and rewoven them into what could have been a changing story for our nation, entrenched them ever more deeply into our economy, and built our politics in service, rather than in opposition, to the core myths, values, and practices that define structural racism. We have locked up our own people at a rate and scale unprecedented in human history and have generated unfathomable pain—some now beyond all healing, and some that will take generations to heal.

We have built a culture of incarceration in a way that has devastated communities of color so disproportionately as to make the lineage from slavery through Jim Crow to our current jails and prisons undeniable. And yet even with that extraordinary inequity, we have still not built it in a way that has protected white people—at least not all white people. We have sent millions upon millions of white people to jail and prison, too, and we have failed to protect many white people—particularly poor white people—from the violence that incarceration is supposed

to resolve. We have made clear that controlling and punishing people of color is more important than meeting the basic needs for food, housing, or medical care, not just for them, but for anyone. Our federal, state, and local budgets make it plain: if we look at cuts to Medicaid alongside our expanding investments in law enforcement and prisons, it is quite literally true that we will let poor people die so long as we can continue to finance our warped attachment to incarceration. At the same time that we have continually renewed our commitment to racism, we have simultaneously doubled down on the ethos of disposability at the heart of the term “white trash,” have capitalized on the unhealed pain in poor white communities, and have fostered racial division through propaganda, intimidation, and policy to ensure that the shared portion of this experience of oppression does not become the basis for collaborative interracial resistance and struggle. Communities of color suffer immensely as a result. Poorer white communities do, too. And while many middle-class and wealthy white people will profit from such division, the price poorer white people will pay for their racial loyalty will be greater in the end than the near-term benefits they are given for adherence. Being just one rung up from the bottom of the ladder of power is little security when the floodwaters rise.

There is no way out of this without dealing with the past. We will have to face what we have done. We will have to face the people who have spent years of their lives in six- by nine-foot boxes with virtually no human contact. We will have to face the millions of children who spent their mornings, bedtimes, birthdays, holidays, and childhoods with their parents separated from them in prison. We will have to face the hundreds of thousands of people who survived sexual violence in the jails and prisons where we sent them. We will have to face people’s pain and night terrors and flashbacks and hypervigilance. And, crucially, we will have to face all of the survivors in communities throughout

this country to whom we promised safety as the reward for this devastation—and who did not become—and still are not—safe as a result. Their pain is our national harvest.

We have championed incarceration with full knowledge of its unquestionable brutality. And we have expanded it in the face of clear and rising evidence of its failure to produce the results it promises. Since incarceration does not merely fail to reduce violence but *generates* violence, our investment in incarceration has been an investment in violence. We are on the hook as a society for answering for the pain this investment has produced—not only to those people who suffer its harms directly, but to those communities that have suffered at the losing end of the policy failure it represents. We can continue to put off correcting our course and answering for it, but the scale of harm is growing and so, too, is what will be required of us to repair it. If by some small chance we have not already crossed the line into the terrain of the irreparable, we would be best off steering into our process of accounting for it now, while some transformation may still be within our reach.

Acts of individual and structural harm are meaningfully different, but the key elements of accountability—acknowledging responsibility for one’s actions, acknowledging the impact of one’s actions on others, expressing genuine remorse, taking actions to repair the harm to the degree possible, and no longer committing similar harm—apply to both. Just as we ask people who cause interpersonal violence to reckon with their actions, so should we as a society call on ourselves to reckon, too. Until we do, no different future will be possible.

The first element of accountability begins with truth-telling. By acknowledging responsibility for our actions, we own our individual and collective roles and power in generating, supporting, or being complicit in the harm that has been caused both by mass incarceration and by our failure to develop effective

solutions for violence. It means saying, “We chose this. We had options, and this is what we did.”

The second element, acknowledging the impact of our actions on others, means saying, “Not only did we choose this, but these are the results of our choices.” It means saying, even if we want to claim that we did not know the effects mass incarceration would have (either individually as citizens, voters, lawmakers, or system actors—or more globally, as an entire society), that we could have known, it was our responsibility to know, and we know now. It means giving up the protection of certain myths and lies deployed to make the choices we have made feel morally sound when they were anything but. It means giving up the security of feigned ignorance. It means truth-seeking, and it means being honest about what we find when we look at our present and our history. “This is the crime of which I accuse my country and my countrymen,” James Baldwin wrote, “and for which neither I nor time nor history will ever forgive them, that they have destroyed and are destroying hundreds of thousands of lives and do not know it and do not want to know it.” It is this crime for which we must repent first.

The third element, expressing genuine remorse, requires apologizing. It means everyone who has contributed to or benefited from this harm—even those of us who were also harmed, even if less so than others were—should admit our role in it and say that we are sorry. This includes individuals addressing each other in our communities and our families in both private and public conversation. It includes leaders of and major investors in businesses that have profited from incarceration. It includes government actors who contributed to building incarceration as we know it. And it includes people currently positioned to speak on behalf of the government (such as elected officials, prosecutors, and judges) speaking publicly about what is right. It is important not to underestimate the importance and potential impact of

acknowledgment and apology. They have been demonstrated to have the capacity to transform relationships on both the individual and community level. It is equally important not to overestimate the importance and potential impact of acknowledgment and apology, as their real and lasting force takes hold only when coupled with acts of repair: saying we are sorry calls for then “doing sorry”—the fourth element of accountability.

When we come to this point of making repair concrete, people often get caught up in logistical concerns about how we might calculate what is owed and how the mechanisms for distribution of those resources would operate. I think these concerns largely miss the point. First, they dodge the fundamental moral issue of whether that repair is owed or not. If it is, then the question is not whether we know how to do it, but how we can figure it out. Second, these concerns tend to vastly overestimate the difficulty of redistributing resources. America has a long history of creating mechanisms to redistribute wealth. The violent takeover of colonization, in which we turned land into profit, and slavery, in which we turned human beings into profit, come to mind as some larger-scale versions of transferring wealth from one group of people to another.

In the other direction, though rarely (if ever) in ways that have been racially equitable, we have the New Deal and the Works Progress Administration, the G.I. bill, and really, virtually all government expenditure, which through taxation distributes individually held resources to public goods upon which everyone depends and to which everyone is entitled. In the international context, the Marshall Plan, which Eddie Ellis, the visionary founder of the Center for NuLeadership on Urban Solutions, and, more recently, notable attorney and justice reform advocate Daryl Atkinson have invoked as a model for reparations, offers an example of a package investment following harm. Some of these mechanisms follow periods of wartime and reflect a recognition

that concentrated loss requires concentrated repair. Others are the ongoing ways in which a society generates the level of basic living standards and equity necessary to ensure not only justice, but social order and peace. I am not an economist, and it is beyond the scope of this book to deliberate on the precise calculations or mechanisms for redistributing resources, but we are being dishonest if we pretend that this is not something we have the intellectual and practical capacity to do. America knows how to make money move.

Crucially, repair does not have to happen at a single time or in a single way. The scope of harm we are repairing certainly did not. We might therefore envision countless municipal strategies to address housing discrimination across the country; local and regional strategies to address lynching and racial terror; regional and national strategies to address the legacy of slavery; and local, regional, and national strategies to address the harms of mass incarceration and of the violence it failed to prevent. These strategies, like the harms they address, could unfold on different and sometimes overlapping timelines and places, with some people participating in only one facet, some in several, and some in all. This debt is owed and keeps accruing. As author and journalist Ta-Nehisi Coates has written:

Having been enslaved for 250 years, black people were not left to their own devices. They were terrorized. In the Deep South, a second slavery ruled. In the North, legislatures, mayors, civic associations, banks, and citizens all colluded to pin black people into ghettos, where they were overcrowded, overcharged, and undereducated. Businesses discriminated against them, awarding them the worst jobs and the worst wages. Police brutalized them in the streets. And the notion that black lives, black bodies, and black wealth

were rightful targets remained deeply rooted in the broader society. Now we have half-stepped away from our long centuries of despoilment, promising, "Never again." But still we are haunted. It is as though we have run up a credit-card bill and, having pledged to charge no more, remain befuddled that the balance does not disappear. The effects of that balance, interest accruing daily, are all around us.¹

Critically, the debt is not just financial. Coates describes reparations not just as some "hush money" or payout, but as "the full acceptance of our collective biography and its consequences."² It is not just a monetary debt that is owed. It is a moral one, too.

If we believe in the full humanity and belonging of every person in our nation, and if we know we have caused great harm to many of our own, then the only thing left to do is to try to make things as right as possible. I have long been persuaded that black people are entitled to reparations for slavery. I believe that workers should be paid for labor and compensated for the intergenerational impacts of mass-scale wage theft. I believe that people who have been violently injured deserve compensation for their pain. I believe that psychological damage is as important as physical injury and as deserving of repair. I believe that failing to address a set of wrongs of such a great scale as slavery effectively justifies those wrongs, normalizes them, excuses them, carries them into our present, and guarantees a future in which versions of them will persist. As Fania Davis has written, "This is urgent. Continued failure to deal with our country's race-based historical traumas dooms us to perpetually re-enact them."³

There is no new way forward without reconciling the debts of the past. I believe there is no expiration on the entitlement to repair, that it perseveres through generations just like the pain at its basis, and that time does not heal all wounds. Only healing

heals all wounds. And as Sonya Shah, a leader in the restorative justice movement, reminds us, “accountability and healing are inextricably linked.”⁴

It will be hard, if not impossible, to fully disentangle the different dimensions of harm from one another. Ultimately, we are obligated to deal with all of it as the massive totality that it is. But we are equally obligated to acknowledge every last wound in every last sector of our lives in which pain has been inflicted and borne. I do not know how the sequencing and interplay of the various dimensions of reckoning should work. I do not know how we will hold the complex positions of non-black people of color in America—America, a country so centrally defined by the black/white binary and so filled with people who do not belong at either end. These questions will be ours to answer collectively. What I do know is that the pain we must address is at once so particular to individual people and specific systems—and at the same time so interconnected, so overlapping, and so intergenerational that we will have to be ready for some nonlinear mess to unfold along the way—or perhaps more accurately, *as the way*—forward.

However the process might unfold, a core dimension of the project of repair must include accounting for the harms of mass incarceration and for the violence it generates and fails to reduce. Some of this repair will be particular and individual; I think of this subset of what is owed almost as restitution rather than reparations. In the criminal justice context, we could see individualized financial restitution used as a means to address wrongful convictions, the lasting financial impact of unjust and outdated bail policies, the indefensible collection of fines and fees in such a way as to debilitate the poor, and much more. These amounts are particular and calculable. As Amanda Alexander of the Detroit Justice Project puts it, “We have the receipts.” It is not hard to imagine comparable forms of restitution for the results of housing discrimination and displacement, for the damage wrought

by inequitable health care, for the wages stolen through “convict leasing,” and more.

Alongside these various forms of individual restitution, some of this project of repair for mass incarceration will be collective and structural, because so much of the harm has been just that. This is the part I would call reparations. As we seek a pathway forward, we have the great benefit of the wisdom, advocacy, and organizing of many of the people who have paid the heaviest price for prison’s failure and have already mapped out notions of what repair might look like. As with charting the course to repair the harms of slavery, many of these leaders are black Americans. But because mass incarceration has disproportionately harmed a wide range of people of color, not only black people, these leaders include people of other races, including leaders in Latino and Native American communities that have been devastated by incarceration and its associated pain.

If we are to rise to the vision they have put forward for us, we will demand an end to both mass incarceration and violence. We will make a commitment to real accountability for violence in a way that is more meaningful and more effective than incarceration. We will develop new strategies to address harm in communities without relying on police. We will expand restorative and transformative justice practices both within and beyond the criminal justice system. We will forge pathways to accountability rooted in the culture and beliefs of the people holding and being held accountable. We will demand healing opportunities as vast and accessible as our current policing infrastructure. We will change policy and we will realign power. We will do this with crime survivors, formerly incarcerated people, and a fundamental commitment to human dignity at the center of all we do. We will experiment, we will imagine, and we will work. The new forms of responding to violence that we develop will be imperfect methods—perhaps forever, but certainly at first. But they will grow in practice; they will develop the solidity that arises from

time and experience; and they will become the very institutions that will anchor the culture we are now finally poised to build.

In practice, some of these changes will include the expansion of alternatives to incarceration, as well as policy shifts and the development of a robust healing infrastructure. But because part of the problem at hand is an overreliance on the criminal justice system to address broad social ills, repair will also require changes in practices entirely outside the criminal justice arena, including a realignment of policy and resources in education, housing, health care, wage equity, and the social service infrastructure as a whole. It will require raising our national standard for meeting everyone's basic needs and creating a context in which everyone can thrive. It will require changing the socioeconomic and structural conditions that make violence likely in the first place and that ensure its persistence.

Similarly, when we recognize the ways in which our dependence on incarceration has fostered violence—whether by nurturing it directly through the criminogenic features of prison or indirectly through the divestment in social services that funding incarceration at this scale has required—we know the people to whom we owe repair include currently and formerly incarcerated people and their families, but also the crime survivors we have failed to keep safe or to help heal. They will also be included as we create spaces for truth-telling and recognition; publicly acknowledge harm that has occurred and the people who have survived it; name policy changes as acts of repair; and compensate people who have been harmed with resources and opportunities that help them rebuild their lives and their communities.

We have available to us models for addressing systemic harm. The truth and reconciliation process in South Africa offers a large-scale reference point for contending with and seeking to transform the intergenerational impacts of structural racism. In Rwanda, the Truth Commission, or the National Unity and Reconciliation Commission, offers an example of how a nation

might carve a path forward among people in the aftermath of genocide. As Fania Davis has observed, these efforts as a whole are limited in that they “strictly define and limit accountability to criminal prosecution and punishment for gross violation of human rights.”⁵ They do not, therefore, include the range of people harmed, the range of people responsible, or all the elements of accountability—including, perhaps most essentially, repair—that are outlined here. Still, they each hold unquestionably useful lessons for what we choose to undertake.

There are also narrower and nearer examples that provide critical insights. In Greensboro, North Carolina, a truth and reconciliation commission addressed a 1979 Ku Klux Klan and Nazi attack on a group of protesters that left five dead and ten injured.⁶ Central to the commission's exploration—and to the harm caused—was the role of the police in sanctioning, or at least failing to prevent, the violence. In Maine, Native people convened the Maine Wabanaki-State Child Welfare Truth & Reconciliation Commission to address the harms caused by the child welfare system.⁷ The Black Women's Truth and Reconciliation Commission is addressing sexual violence as a human rights atrocity against women and girls of African descent past and present.⁸ In Boston, a truth-seeking process is examining the violence associated with school desegregation.⁹ The Chicago Torture Justice Memorials Project and others secured reparations from the City of Chicago for victims of police torture.¹⁰ Leading reform advocates Dr. Alice Greene and Cassandra Frederique have called for reparative justice responses to the War on Drugs. And countless people across the country, including Fania Davis, have called for truth and reconciliation commissions to address the harm caused to black people in the United States—both by the police and more broadly.¹¹ In that realm, the visionary work of the Equal Justice Initiative has already undertaken so much of the practical and moral burden of documenting the history we will all have to repair. We are not without examples or guides.

The acts of truth-telling and repair that are at the heart of such processes are critical foundations for the fifth and final element of accountability—becoming people who will not cause harm again. That transformation requires both personal change and change in structures: to be most durable, people have to not want to *and* not be able to cause the same kind of harm again. Ensuring that the harm will not recur therefore requires a realignment of power, from those who have caused harm to those who have been harmed. With mass incarceration and violence, that realignment involves relocating the authority to define and secure safety so that it shifts from the systems that have held that power to the communities that are most impacted. It means not only shrinking systems but developing solutions that stand to displace them. And it means building political power to protect those changes from backsliding and backlash. The people whose lives are at stake will need to have the durable collective power to choose, implement, and sustain solutions.

Because the repair at hand is structural, everyone who has been impacted—as people who have experienced harm, caused harm, or both—will have a role in driving, defining, and implementing repair. Central among those who will have to support this shift—and if history and culture are a guide, will be most likely to resist it—are white people. I believe that white people should participate in this shift for the benefit of people of color. But that is not the whole of it. What I have come to understand more recently is why we as white people need to engage in repair not just for our own humanity, but for our own interests. The exercise we must undertake is not race-neutral. Just as mass incarceration's impact has not been evenly distributed, so, too, must the repair be proportionate to the harm caused. That will mean a concentration of resources in communities of color. The repair must go to where the damage—and therefore the debt incurred—has been greatest, and we white people will need to be prepared for a substantial redistribution of resources toward communities of color throughout the country.

This obligation is straightforward if perhaps quite challenging for white people, particularly middle-class and wealthy white people whose families have not been affected by incarceration. This obligation is clear for white people who, even if they are relatively poor, have worked in jails or prisons or the industries connected to them and so have profited directly from what we have done as a society. But our debt and obligation may seem complicated for white people who have benefited from their racial privilege but at the same time have been on the losing side of class-based oppression that has led to incarcerating poor and working-class white people at rates vastly higher than their rich counterparts. What does this mean for poor and working-class white people who have been locked up and survived violence? What if people both owe and are owed for this collective pain?

However central racial equity will be to structural change, addressing the harms of mass incarceration will also mean repair to the families of white people who have been devastated by prison and its lasting aftermath in people's lives. When it comes to broad-scale realignment of resources, the beneficiaries must include all people of color, but others, too. Although the realignment of resources recommended here will begin to take from white people their relative advantage vis-à-vis people of color, for low-income white people, the changes proposed here will be overwhelmingly in their favor. The reinvestment of resources in schools, jobs, roads, treatment, hospitals, and healing will benefit white people whose communities have been under-resourced, partially as the result of our overinvestment in law enforcement, jails, and prisons. If our current system has pitted poor people of different races against each other in a way that is ultimately to the detriment of us all, then this realignment at its best will invert that pattern and create opportunities for shared struggle and well-being.

White people, even when we are disadvantaged in the system, are still always better positioned than similarly situated people of

color, so white people—even those of us who have been harmed by mass incarceration—cannot merely wait to become recipients of the benefits of this repair. We are, as we would say in a restorative justice context, both harmed and responsible parties. And so we have to be active agents in bringing about that repair. We have to tell the truth about our pain, about what we have lost, about how mass incarceration has ravaged our lives and families. At the same time, we have to tell the truth about the ways in which we still got lighter sentences and better treatment than many people of color who committed the same crimes that we did. We have to name what was taken from us by this inhumane system; and we have to acknowledge what we were given, even in the belly of that beast, that folks of color never received. We have to fight for more sensible sentencing, fair policing, humane distribution of resources, accessible healing, durable change, fixing what is broken, and building what we want in its place. We have to advocate for these things for ourselves—and, to fulfill our role in the larger repair, we have to ensure that our demands are not met at the expense of others, as they have been for so long, but rather we must insist on a rising tide that raises all ships. As my incisive friend and colleague Lorenzo Jones put it, “Poor and formerly incarcerated white people have to fight for what they’re due; and they have to make sure everyone gets it.” And for white people who have been fully insulated from the ravages of mass incarceration—well, we just have to be ready to make thorough, vast, and overdue amends. We have to steer into our reckoning.

That is, admittedly, a lot to ask. Most people don’t take the opportunity to choose a reckoning. Most wait for it to come to them, though it is always worse when it does. It is like the choice between going to the doctor when we feel a faint but troubling pain in our chest or waiting until we collapse in the street to address it; it is always better to go by choice, but that does not always mean we go, nor does it almost ever mean the doctor’s news for us is good. Being honest about what we have done will

not be easy, nor should we expect to be greeted with an open, forgiving embrace from those whose lives we have destroyed brutally for generations. The grace on the other side of reckoning is matched only by the rage and pain and messiness of the road there. I do believe, based on history and analysis, that choosing such a reckoning is both logical and practical. I also believe it is an act of faith.

In cases of interpersonal wrongdoing, accountability is to those responsible for harm what grief is to those harmed. It is an unparalleled tool for responsible parties to transform their shame, and in so doing, to recuperate a sense of dignity, self-worth, connectedness, and hope—the things they lost when they caused harm. Accountability is as essential as any grieving process to restoring us to our best selves.

I think that holds true in the context of large-scale social harm as well. If it is true that when we hurt people we feel shame, that shame drives violence, and that the only pathway out of shame is through accountability, then the pathway out of mass incarceration and the violence that comes with it must include accountability—not just because those harmed deserve it, but because those of us who have contributed to or benefited from that harm deserve it, too—in the toughest and kindest senses of the word “deserve.”

I believe that white people know, on some level, what we have done. I believe that because we are human and because human beings are fundamentally good, we feel ashamed of those choices and their impact. I believe that shame is compounded when people we love are caught up in the systems we have condoned. And I believe, because we are human, that until that shame is resolved, we will do what ashamed humans do: we will act it out as violence. We will do that interpersonally in our own families and communities. And because we have more access to structural power, we will do it through institutions—including, most centrally for the challenge explored here, through the

criminal justice system. We will justify our inhumanity toward other people by making claims that they are inhuman—because only then will we feel any insulation from our shame for hurting them so terribly. We will punish more and more harshly, as if to prove that we were not wrong about who “those people” are—because if we *were* wrong, if we *are* wrong, then we have done an unimaginably terrible—even an irreparable?—thing. If we do not resolve our shame, we will do what Dr. James Gilligan saw countless people do: we will seek to eradicate the witnesses of our wrongdoing. We will do so through violence—our own violence and the violence of the state that acts in our names. We will do so through exclusion—including one of the largest-scale mass exclusion experiments in human history, in which we literally send people somewhere we refer to only as “away”: mass incarceration. And we will do so through attempts at erasure—by retelling history in a way that excludes the bases for our responsibility or the evidence of its effects on others.

None of this will work. All of the harm we do to escape that reckoning will only add to the toll for which we ultimately have to answer. Because while shame compels us to violence, violence does not resolve our shame. Only accountability does.

And so white folks in America have—terrifyingly, urgently, blessedly—a choice. We can continue to act out of shame, stuck in its clutches, diminished by its force, constrained by its power over us. Or we can rise out of it through accountability. We can say that what we did was wrong. We can say that we know it hurt people. We can say we are sorry. We can do sorry, taking actions to make the harms of the past as right as possible. And we can begin to become a people who will never do it again.

When we do that, I believe we will reap benefits that are unimaginable to us from this side of that reckoning. I believe not only will we regain our dignity, self-worth, connectedness, and hope, I believe we will be able to give and receive love more and better than we’ve ever known. I believe we will be able to feel

proud—not because we are superior to other people, but because we are superior to our own former selves. We will become people who are better—not better than others, but better than we once were. We will become people who have earned our dignity. And for those of us who are poor, we will become people who can finally align with people of color who share our conditions and fight to get the wages, housing, health care, and protection we have always deserved.

In all of this, many of us—not just white people—will be tempted to look only forward because what is behind us is so hard to face. We will want to do it once (at most) and say we are done. But only the discipline of anchoring our future in our past—not in a way that is constrained by it, but in a way that grows from it—will honor everyone who has been harmed and will strengthen those of us who have caused harm in our ongoing accountable rise out of shame. And for those we have hurt, like for most survivors of violence, what will happen on the other side of such a process, what healing or rage or transformation may arise from it, is unknowable on this side; but the fact that it is unknowable does not make it any less urgent or any less deserved.

One thing all this collective labor to address the harms of mass incarceration and violence will buy America is the chance to build something new in the place of what we are working to end. Our aim cannot only be less use of broken strategies. It has to be the development and expansion of better, more effective, more humane strategies. Of the key facets of sound responses to violence—survivor-centered, accountability-based, safety-driven, and racially equitable—the first three sound so familiar. Victims, accountability, and safety. These three have been deployed to advance draconian criminal justice policy for decades. But these principles belong to those of us who are fighting for a more just system. They are ours. And when we do the work of building alternatives to the system as it is, it turns out that not only do we believe them more deeply, we are better at

them, too. In the end, we do not have to just push back against the system as we know it. We have to render that system obsolete.

One day we will tell the history of how these new ways of being came to be, and that history will include the fact that we told the truth, that we who were responsible said we were sorry, and that we all did something different from what we had done. If (and I believe, only if) we do that, “we can,” as James Baldwin foretold, “make America what America must become.”

When I think about that road to repair, I do not believe that those of us who have had the fortune to participate in accountability processes, including restorative justice circles, have everything that is needed to displace mass incarceration. But I do believe we have something essential to offer. We know a thing about reckoning.

I have had the huge privilege of spending the past decade of my life with people who are in the process of reckoning with what they have done. And what I know is that virtually no one wants to choose it. It is unappealing at best, terrifying at worst. Very few of our responsible parties at Common Justice go into their circles with great enthusiasm. Most go in trembling or dragging themselves along. Many of our harmed parties, while always there voluntarily, go in with similar ambivalence and fear. It never quite seems like a good idea right before it begins. And then—every single time—it turns out to have been the right thing to do. People typically get the things they hoped for going in—closure, recognition, answers, connection, clarity, a path to repair. But people almost always get something more. There is a level of dignity and of pride available to our responsible parties that most could not even imagine for themselves on their way in to the circle. There is a level of resolution and well-being for our harmed parties that most believed could never be theirs. There is a way of being in the world and with what happened that becomes clear only on the other side of reckoning. It is more—bigger, bet-

ter, more complete—than we knew to ask for. And it is almost always there.

I believe America has advanced as far as we can toward equity without facing the truth about our history. I believe we got every drop of change we could out of our current story, and that the next step requires telling some greater truths. I believe we are due for a reckoning. I understand our collective desire and the wild contortions of our culture that we are going through to avoid it. But I also believe it is time. And I believe that on the other side of that reckoning is an America we never even dared to imagine—not really, not in our bones, not yet. I believe it is an America that can, for the first time, hold us all. It is an America that is ours to choose, ours to create, and ours to earn.